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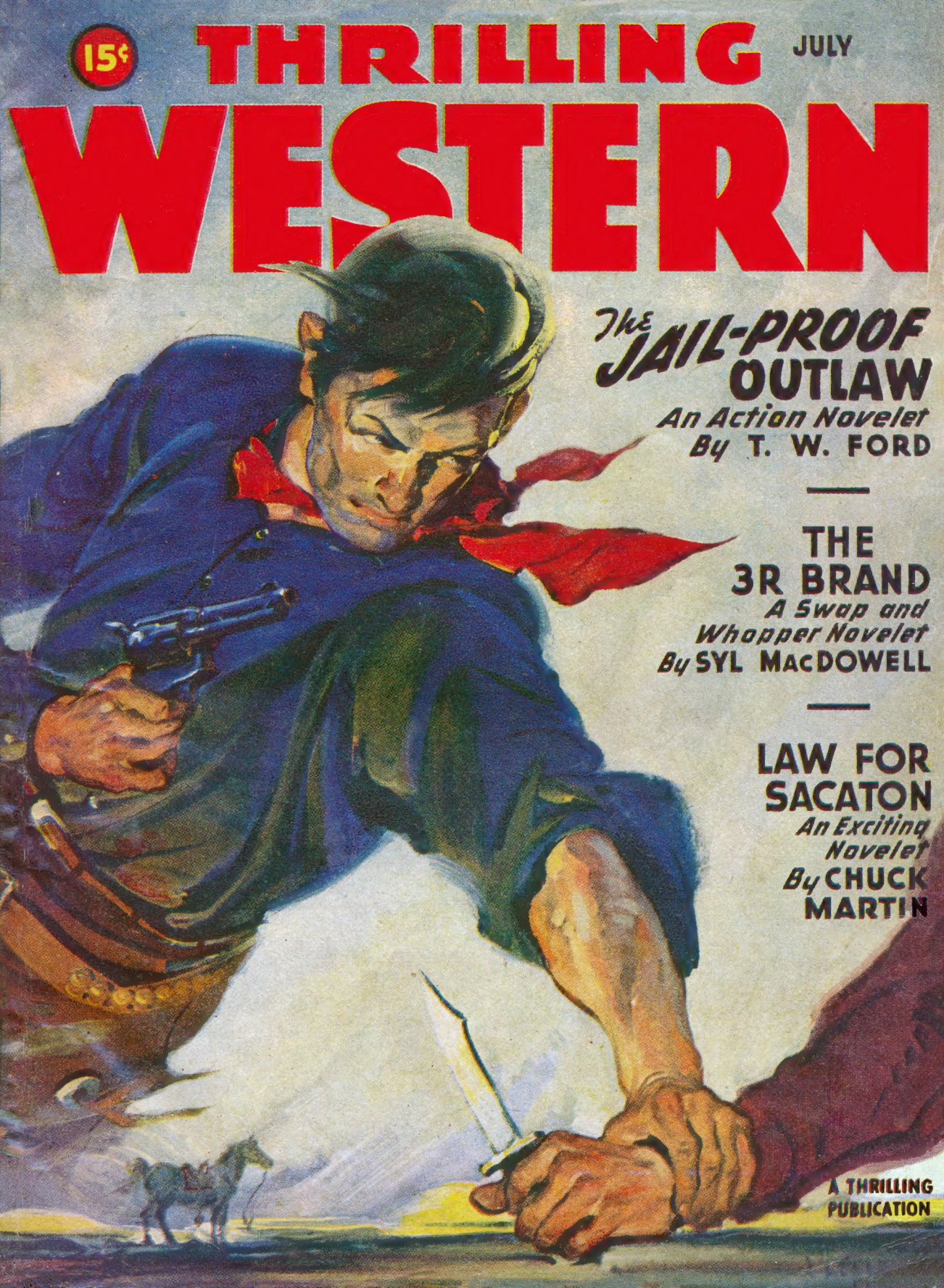

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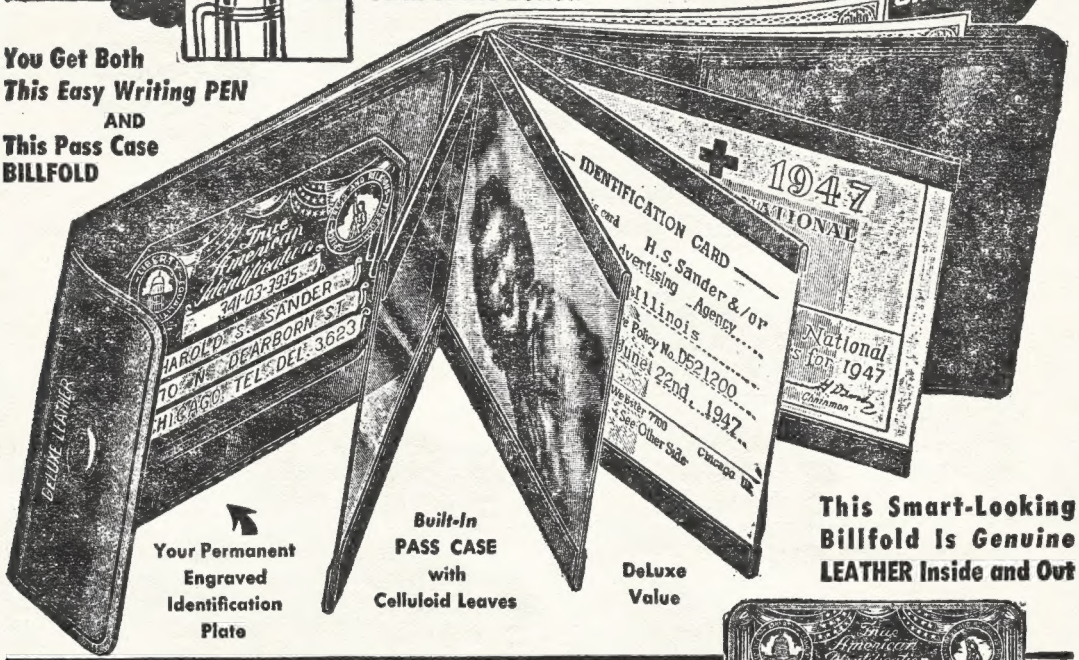

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THRILLING WESTERN

Vol. XLII, No. 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION July, 1947

Four Complete Novelets

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Sheriff Smoke Curtis faces his toughest job when he tries to hold a leash on Killer Brunnermann, the evil outlaw who just can't be slain!

LAW FOR SACATON.....*Chuck Martin* **44**
Jim Marshal takes some plumb tough treatment in a wild gun-roaring town, but he proves he can dish out plenty of woe for lawbreakers!

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Longrider Hank Barrows lingers to help a needy family—despite the fact that the law is on his heels, and he hasn't one moment to spare!

THE 3R BRAND.....*Syl MacDowell* **70**
When Swap's mistaken for a schoolteacher at Brushy Bald, a pair of wandering waddies are sure fed up on reading, writing and arithmetic!

Five Short Stories

KID MARSHAL.....*Paul S. Powers* **35**
Clint McKay throws a gun bluff as he seeks the killer of his brother

BAIT FOR BOOTHILL.....*Edwin K. Sloat* **83**
Old Sam Figgen thought a relative worth a heap more than mere gold

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Drawing pictures was Marty's undoing until he got a line on a crook

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The button knew one of four hombres was guilty of his Dad's killing

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Shawnee Clark always kept his Sharps ready just in case of emergency

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HOW WELL DO YUH KNOW YORE WEST?.....*Quiz Feature* **90**

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The HITCHING Rail

HOLA, folks, and welcome once again to the Old Hitchin' Rail fraternity. Light, roll yoreself a smoke, and set you down to a pow-wow o' desert, plain, and mountain trail, and we'll swap stories o' the folks what rides 'em.

There's many a tale o' rannies and gals yet to be told, and many a happenin'—some of 'em pretty strange listenin', too. Ain't no two humans jest alike, not even them identical twins, if you know 'em well. 'Course, all people are alike in some general respects, but if we meet up with anyone a whole heap different from ourselves we're apt to think he's queer. That's human nature.

Old Salty McGuire

There was folks as called old Salty McGuire "cracked" and "loco", and all because he put his trust in a turquoise ring. Salty was "different", there's no denyin', but he wasn't "loco." That old character was as good a judge o' humans and nature, not forgettin' animals, as you'd find in a long day's search, but he believed in the divine power o' his turquoise.

Like folks that believe in fairies and claim to talk with the dead, he was thought queer by us mortals without the gift.

Salty had him a little sheep ranch not far from the old turquoise quarry lyin' South and slightly West o' Santa Fe, New Mexico. He grazed his sheep on the desert under the great blue dome o' the sky, and while watchin' his flock he communed with nature and dreamed his dreams, harmin' nobody.

Them woolies was all the same as humans to Salty, and his big shepherd dog, Ring—so named because o' the white ruff o' hair around his neck—was his blood brother, accordin' to Salty McGuire. The big, black shepherd was pretty nearly human, I'll admit.

I've watched him single out a lame sheep from the flock at a mere grunt from Salty, and he'd wrangle that lone woolie out o' the flock and back where his master waited.

There was no disputin' the fact that, in his own way, Salty was a contented man. He had everything a man needed, he said, and he was happy. And he claimed what he called his good luck all come to him through the turquoise stone in the heavy silver ring he wore. God laid the roundstone, like a big drop o' heaven's blue, in his path one day, to guide him, he vowed.

Most people couldn't see as Salty had any good luck, nor any reason to be content. His life was without luxury, his livin' lean and barren, and the loneliness o' his days would have drove most people insane. But his mind seemed peopled with things and happenin's the rest of us couldn't see or understand.

"This yere turquoise brought me all my good luck," he'd tell you, gently rubbin' the stone with the fingers o' his gnarled right hand. He always wore the heavy ring on the weddin' ring finger o' his left hand. "Saved my life, oncet."

The Stone Changes Color

And while his keen old eyes in his dried-apple face studied the sky, then roamed over his flock grazin' before him, he'd tell you the story.

"You see this here turquoise?" he'd begin. "It's more green than blue now. Some think it's jade, 'cause o' its color. But it was sky-blue when it was laid at my feet. Turquoise sometimes changes color when wore by human folks. That's because it savvies what goes on inside o' hombre's, and knows what's gonna happen. Takes care o' them what puts their trust in its guidin' power.

"Well," he'd say, gettin' on with the story, "the sheep was grazin' over near Baldy one day, way up that arroyo, half way up the peak. Wasn't a cloud in the sky, 'cept a little patch no bigger'n yore hand what was hoverin' over Baldy. I was buildin' a fire with mesquite limbs, aimin' on boilin' coffee for my dinner. I'd took the jerked beef and tor-

(Continued on page 8)

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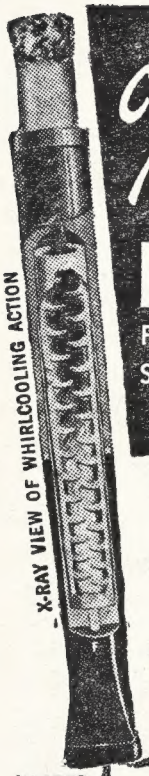

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THE HITCHING RAIL

(Continued from page 6)

tillas from my saddlebags and was squattin' down beside the fire, breakin' sticks to feed the blaze, when all of a sudden I felt a sudden prickin' o' my finger under my ring. I looked at it clost, and there, oozin' from the the flesh was a single drop o' blood. I wiped it away, straightened the ring, and low and behold, the turquoise stone had changed from blue to green.

"Right away I recognized it as a sign from heaven that all was not as it should be with the sky. I looked up at that little patch o' sky, and I saw that it had changed color, too. Black as midnight when they ain't no moon or stars. Then I saw the rain begin to fall in a twistin' sheet on the mountain side. Twasn't more'n a minute before there was a roarin' rushin' sound that I savvied was a cloudburst. Ring had heard it, too. That white hair on his neck was standin' up like a lion's neck hair. 'Fore I could recover my senses that dog was boundin' up the draw, already roundin' up the sheep. I jumped on my hoss and lit a shuck behind him.

In the Nick of Time

"We got the sheep out o' the draw and on high ground jest in the nick o' time. Next minute a churnin', chargin' river was rushin' down the draw. The place where my coffee had been aboilin' on the fire was ten feet under water before you could say Lord 'amassy. Yes, Suh," he'd say with a nod o' his old head, "hadn't abeen for this yere ring them sheep would a washed down the stream like bits o' cotton from a cotton wood tree. And Salty McGuire would sure as sun-up been sleepin' right now in a watery grave."

Lots o' folks believe that the turquoise gem brings good luck to the wearer. Some will tell you it's a cure for dyspepsia and insanity. It's a well-known fact, though, that the stone will often change its color from blue to green.

Whether the acids and heat o' the flesh o' the wearer has anything to do with its changin' color, I don't know. But the theory that water causes the change is a mistake. The stones, usually in the form o' blue beads, are often found in the ruins o' Pueblo Indian dwellin's, where they've been exposed to rain and all weather for hundreds o' years, and they're still a bright, sky-blue when found.

Chemists say it's soap that changes 'em, but many folks, like Salty McGuire, has got other theories. The Pueblo Indians o' our West knew and valued the turquoise centuries before the comin' o' the Spanish Conquistadores to their country.

Where Turquoise is Found

Jest recent I've had a inquiry from a iron worker in a foundry in New England. He's wantin' to know what places they're found in the United States, particularly what parts o' New Mexico. "In what formation do they occur?" he asks.

There's lots o' turquoise in the deserts o' the Southwest, though the first ones were found in Persia, and the biggest mines in the world are still operatin' in that country. Back in 1300 A. D. a description o' the Persian turquoise mines near Nishapur was written. Chemically the mineral is aluminum phosphate, containin' a little copper.

In minin' turquoise the mineral is not, as a rule, found as a single gem stone, like diamonds, or emeralds, but is found in chunks o' matrix in thin seams, elongated nodules, or irregular masses, in certain granite rocks. It has always been cut round, or oval, as a gem stone.

In its pure state the turquoise is as blue as the sky, though there's the matrix type that is gray-green and flecked, instead o' solid color.

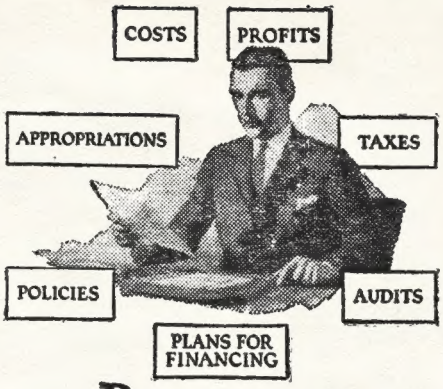
As to where they can be found in the United States: There's turquoise in quantities worth notice in New Mexico, Nevada, Arizona, and in the desert country o' California. In Nevada they have the Snowstorm, Royston, and Crow Springs districts. And there's lots in New Mexico. Some o' the oldest quarries in the state are found in Los Cerrillos Hills, in Santa Fe County, south, and somewhat west o' Santa Fe.

The Burro Mountains, near Grant County, are another sector, and the Hatchita Range in Hidalgo County is a early minin' region for turquoise. And there's silver, gold, and copper found in most o' these regions, also.

Chino Grass

Now, gettin' on with the mail: Here's a letter from Perry Maxwell, ex-service man whose startin' him a little ranchin' spread up near Pueblo, Colorado.

(Continued on page 108)



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WHEW! THAT'S "PLATINUM ROW". I'D BETTER CLEAN UP FIRST

THANKS FOR THE RAZOR, JOE. THIS BLADE'S A HONEY!

THIN GILLETTES ARE ALWAYS LIKE THAT . . . PLENTY KEEN AND LONG-LASTING

. . . AND TODAY, AT LONG LAST, WE FOUND THE MISSING HEIR. HIS NAME . . . LARRY RICHMOND!

GREAT STORY . . . WHY, THAT'S ME!

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THIS ALL SEEMS LIKE A WONDERFUL DREAM, MISS MORRIS

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HE'S SO HANDSOME

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Price's weapon cracked, and the deputy pitched from the saddle

THE JAIL-PROOF OUTLAW

By T. W. FORD

Sheriff Smoke Curtis faces his toughest job when he tries to hold the leash on Killer Brunnermann, the evil outlaw who cannot be slain by bullets, cold steel or hangrope!

CHAPTER I

A Mysterious Shadow

THE new prisoner riled Sheriff "Smoke" Curtis, and the lawman didn't try to hide his displeasure. An ordinary horsethief was just a plumb nuisance when he had a famous outlaw like "Slip" Brunnermann behind bars—Brunnermann, the outlaw-killer whom bullets couldn't slay nor bars hold.

Nothing else in the world was important to Curtis now except keeping Brunnermann and the others of his bunch locked up till the circuit judge came in next week. After that, it wouldn't be

long until the lobo would be dancing on air with a rope around his neck. And when the renowned "Hellfire" Sells, the U. S. marshal, sloped in, Curtis could greet him with a puzzled smile and casually inform him they'd taken care of Brunnermann.

The deputy from Brand County, who had brought in the horsethief, spoke with an apologetic air.

"If yuh could just hold him till I go and pick up his saddle pard—I wounded him too—I'd sure appreciate it." The deputy from up-state was a gawky, raw-boned man with a face so hot-red it looked as if he were constantly blushing. He fingered his battered lawman's badge nervously. "I know you got a *cuartel* here that ain't leaky."

"The Wagon Wheel jailhouse is danged near as escape-proof as State Prison itself!" snapped Curtis.

Sheriff Curtis was one of those big, slouching men, sloping-shouldered, and thick around the middle. He looked as if he was toting a lot of suet and as if he was sluggish in the bargain. Actually, Curtis was all tough beef and bull-like muscle, a brute for punishment, and tough-minded as well. When he whiffed the skunk sweat of a law-breaker, he simply waded in behind a screen of gun-smoke, heedless of his own personal safety, a rampaging brute.

"This jailhouse is escape-proof!" he reiterated.

Up in the second-floor cells, the outlaws could hear his sharp nasal voice. Up above them, outside, some thirty odd feet above the jailhouse roof, the warm range wind stirred the dusty-looking leaves of a giant eucalyptus, swayed its great gnarled bough that arched over the jail.

The tree grew off the jail property, in the empty lot beyond the jailyard walls. In the shaft of wan moonlight the big horizontal bough seemed to have a strange lump about halfway out. Then the wind died and the uppermost foliage settled back, cutting off the moonlight. And the lump glued to the bough shifted and raised a little and began to snake out farther. Another minute and a long line of manila hemp weighted with a small stone at the end began to dribble down from the massive limb.

PLAYING out slowly, steadily the rope settled with a faint rattle on the tin roof of the building.

Downstairs, in the office, Smoke Curtis nodded reluctantly to the deputy from Brand County. Of course, he could have raked the deputy over the coals. Asked him by what authority he was grabbing a man outside of his own bailiwick. But Curtis was an old-fashioned badge-packer anyway. The devil with warrants or county lines or how you got your man, just so long as you hung the dead-wood on a lawbreaker.

"I reckon we can throw his breeches in a cell for you."

"Good," the Brand deputy said, throwing a thumb at the insignificant, slightly stooped man beside him. "His handle is Price, Vin Price. I don't reckon he'll give yuh any trouble."

For the first time Curtis let his little eyes scour over the prisoner. The man was a two-bit, small bore, down-at-the-heel pelican, dressed in cracked boots, soiled jeans and a ragged hickory shirt. His right arm dangled limply, its sleeve ripped almost to the shoulder, revealing a red-stained bandage. He had hang-dog written all over him, standing with a half-cowering air. It was hard to tell much about his face. A heavy beard stubble half masked it. And the large round eyes flanking the sharply hooked nose under ragged black hair ran away as Curtis' eyes scrutinized him.

The sheriff strode up and ran big gnarled hands over him roughly in a search for hideout weapons. All the time one of his deputies, George Flowers, stood in the doorway of the other front room, his ready gun covering the proceedings.

Curtis found nothing on the horse-thief. Under his clothes he seemed held together by thin muscles which were little more than wire. But he radiated a strange gentleness.

Curtis sneered as he stepped back, and expectorated into the box of sawdust over in the corner. He knew the breed. They lacked the sand, the toughness, to be real badmen, gun-slingers. They just skulked and stole.

"All right," he said, accepting the prisoner.

The Brand County man slapped on

On all sides, gun-slicks jumped from cover and flung themselves toward the barn

his pinch-topped sombrero and said he'd be hitting the trail. Big Curtis hitched his pearl-gray pants up about his big waist, then motioned Deputy Flowers back as the latter reached for the iron key ring on the open rolltop desk.

"I'll take him up myself," Curtis said.

It wasn't that he didn't trust Flowers. But the man had been attached to his office less than three weeks. And the sheriff simply wasn't taking the slightest chance with Brunnermann in his jail. Besides, he wanted to take a look-see at the lobo leader just to be certain everything was all right.

Up over the jailhouse, a man's body wavered from the eucalyptus bough. Then he came down the manila rope, loose-legged, lowering himself swiftly by the knots along the rope's length.

He was a little stiff. Since late that afternoon, when he had reeled into the vacant lot from the side street, he had lain propped against the eucalyptus trunk as if sleeping in a drunken stupor. His boots touched the roof lightly and then he let himself settle by inches, going to all fours finally.

He waited. No outcry, no alarm. He started over for the left, rear corner, eyes cutting around, shifting his weight carefully as the tin buckled a little under him. Then he froze and sank flat against the roof as a train hooted like a night owl in the cut north of the town.

Diagonally across the main street, up where it humped, a woman had poked her head out of a second story window. The elevation of the ground up there gave her a view overlooking the jailhouse roof. And she seemed to be looking right at Black Tom, the man up there. He pushed his black-bearded face against the tin and waited. Nothing happened. But when, after a couple of minutes, he risked another look, the woman was still at the window, elbows propped on the sill.

Inside, Curtis started to escort Price down the corridor connecting the sheriff's office with the cell block, but the deputy, George Flowers, stopped him.

"Your guns, boss," he reminded him, and Curtis remembered. It was a rule that nobody, not even the lawmen themselves were allowed upstairs with their hardware on.

He came back, dropped his two big sixes on the desk, then took the prisoner through the door of iron bars midway down the corridor. Flowers handed Curtis the lantern, then relocked the door after the sheriff.

They went upstairs, Price shuffling along with that beaten air. Even though he was actually not a small man, just ordinary-sized and looking, he gave the impression of littleness, weakness. He acted as if this predicament was an old familiar one to him and that he had long since given up even resenting it. Once, he stumbled over his own boots and ran his sleeve across his nose with a snuffling sound.

"Some more buzzard bait," jeered a gent in the first cell on the right rear.

It was one of Brunnermann's boys. There was another prisoner in with him, a sawed-off stub of man who limped heavily. In contrast to the others of the bunch, he was seedily garbed and always silent.

SMOKE CURTIS' lantern sprayed into the next cell. All the cells had barred fronts, the occupants always in full view to the most casual glance of anybody passing.

Curtis' little eyes lighted with triumph as he looked into that cage, past the tall slab of man at the bars to the short stocky one smoking a little brown Mexican-type cigar on the bunk. That was Slip Brunnermann himself. You'd know it at a glance. He had big-shot boss smeared all over him. He had fancy boots with a silver design inlaid on the toes, fancy, fawn-colored pants, a blue silk shirt above a brass-studded gunbelt. Beside him lay a rich black Stetson, almost brand new. His brown hair was parted on the side, carefully combed.

At sight of the sheriff, he swung off the bunk and sauntered to the cell front unhurriedly, short and broad with a bold face as background for the embroidery of a perpetual sneer.

"Hello, law-dog," he drawled. Then he spat through the bars.

Curtis took a swipe at the bars with the club he had picked up just inside the door in the corridor below. The tough wood made the heavy iron ring. The outlaw boss stepped back unhur-

riedly, swore lazily.

"By thunder, yuh're a brave man, Curtis!" he jeered.

"We'll see how brave you are early some mornin' next week," Curtis threw back. Then he unlocked the cell across the way, shoved the unresisting Vin Price in, and went back downstairs.

Up on the roof, Black Tom slowly raised himself to all fours. The night train was huffing up the grade out of Wagon Wheel, its engine cascading a shower of sparks above the yellow pine, couplings clanking on the night. Then Black Tom went down flat again. The woman was back at the window and that fleecy trailer of cloud had pulled its veil from the sickly moon's face.

Down in his office, Curtis pushed away the greasy dinner dishes on his desk, drew on his cigarette till its tip gleamed like a hot coal. Flowers, a thin man with a sharply-alert look, sat in a chair propped against the wall at the other side. He would be just behind the door if it opened, and he kept a Colts constantly in his lap, so that anybody entering that door would be covered from behind. They were taking absolutely no chances. Brunnermann was the biggest catch a lawman could hope for in a lifetime.

The usually calm, matter-of-fact Smoke Curtis had a jumpy nervousness running around his insides. He couldn't get rid of it even though he knew the jailhouse was escape-proof. Brunnermann had escaped from so many places. His bunch had snaked him out over at Palo Verde, blasting a hole in the back of the jail itself. Brunnermann had been badly injured in the explosion and his men had toted him out more dead than alive. Yet, two weeks later, he had personally led a bank raid at Big Skull. They'd had him behind bars at Morgan Junction. At Poker Hill. Lowery. Other places. Yet always he had managed to get out somehow. There was something miraculous about it, like the charmed life he was said to lead.

Brunnermann had been shot out of the saddle on more than one occasion. Clay Scott, famed trigger-slammer, hired to clean up Red Bank, had poured lead into Brunnermann's frame one bloody night before the lobo's band had swung in to carry off the apparently bullet-ridden body of their leader. And inside of a month he had appeared at the head of his bunch at the hold-up of a dance less than twenty miles from Red Bank.

Early this year, a posse had cornered Brunnermann and two of his gun-slicks in a house in Cochise County, burnt it to the ground. No man had walked out alive. Yet, in a matter of days, a stage-coach had been stopped and a doctor in it kidnaped to be taken back into the hills to treat an hours-old wound in Brunnermann's leg.

It was incredible. It was eerie. It seemed impossible either to kill the man or hold him behind bars. These things had given Brunnermann his nickname, "Slip", a contraction of "Slippery." And Smoke Curtis, working his clenched hand hard into the desk, had to admit it was an understatement if anything.

"But he ain't a-going to slip outa this jail," Curtis growled. "When he leaves here—it'll be to be hung, by gor!"

BOOTS hit the jailhouse steps. Curtis' two other deputies, Yucca Lamb and Hanning, came in. With them was Stan Bridger, a burly man with a heavy mustache and popping eyes in a brick-red face that befitted his truculent manner. He was the cousin of Matt Bridger, an old-timer in the country, who had the Box B up on Bittersweet Creek.

The younger Stan had come into the country about two years back, helping Matt run the outfit. It had been a long time since Smoke Curtis had seen the jovial Matt himself. The older man was ill and did not come into town any more.

"Howdy, Sheriff," greeted Stan Bridger in that loud forceful voice of his. "Hope yuh got that snake of a Brunnermann still safe."

Curtis said he had. He didn't know Stan Bridger very well. But there was something about the pushy man that rubbed the wrong way.

"See that yuh keep him locked up darn tight, Curtis," Stan Bridger went on. "This piece of country's gotta have peace so a man can do business. We been losing stock steady up there at the Box B. If Brunnermann should git away

now, there'd be one devil of a howl raised!"

Curtis eyed him coldly. "This jail ain't leaky—or ever been. And I can run my business without any help, thanks."

Stan Bridger shifted his tobacco plug and grinned broadly. "Ain't a-trying to interfere, Curtis. Just wanted to help. I was thinking that if yuh wanted, I could put some of my men in here to help yuh guard him."

Curtis shook his big head curtly. "Thanks. But me and my deputies can handle things, I reckon." He noticed the way Bridger spoke of "my men" as if he owned the Box B. He gave him a nod as the cowman left.

"That pelican makes a heap of noise," said Yucca Lamb.

Curtis swore. "If Brunnermann goes outa here, it'll be over my corpse," he spat out.

Up above, Brunnermann sat with a quiet knowing smile, twisting a thread hanging from his ragged shirt-cuff. He had heard Black Tom's low whistle from the roof. Soon he, Brunnermann, would be out of this *cuartel*, once again the incredible will-o'-the-wisp no bars could hold, once again cheating the rope.

CHAPTER II

Cold-blooded Murder

MOONBEAMS slanted through the narrow windows of the jail on the west side, into the cell of Price, the new prisoner. Across the hall, the Brunnermann men could see him pacing back and forth with a leopardlike stride, through that shaft of moonlight. His hat slung on the bunk, he kept raking a hand through his black hair, occasionally cursing in a husky voice. Instead of calming down, he seemed to get more and more overwrought with time.

Finally, one of the Brunnermann quartet called over, "What the devil yuh got yore wind up for, stranger? You can only git yore chips cashed once. What's the charge against you, huh?"

The little ranny, Price, looked over with a vacant stare, blinked twice, then seemed to hear the question for the first time.

"Aw, it's only a horse-stealing charge," he answered. "It ain't it that's got me mad. That deputy never would have give me a catching if it weren't for that dying prospector I stopped to help." He began to pace again.

"Prospector?" The little seedy man had climbed off his bunk to come forward to the front bars of the back cell in the corner.

Again Price didn't seem to hear until after some moments. Then he turned and beat his chest with fisted hands and came to the front of his own cell.

"Sure, a prospector! Run across him up in the Yellow Pony Hills. He was almost dead then. Taken a fall and busted a leg an' was trying to get to a doc on his burro when I found him. He must have hurt himself inside because he kept spitting up blood and passed off in an hour or so. I did my best to ease him out. And then—" He shrugged, started to pace again restlessly.

"And so the Law caught up with you. Well, you was a dang fool!" said one of the leathery-faced Brunnermann men.

The little man across the way stopped and faced them again. He began to toss up a brass rifle shell, empty, catching it in his left hand and sending it spinning up again.

"Was I? Well, I don't know, seeing as how this gent was placer mining and had hit a rich pocket. Told me he'd taken about ten thousand dollars in gold nuggets out of it already. And afore he died, because I was kind to him, he drew me a map showing where he had the nuggets cached out back of his cabin on the creek. So, I don't know. If I was only outa here." He began the restless pacing again.

"You got that map on you?" It was the shabby little man in the back cell speaking again.

Price shook his head, coming over and gripping the heavy bars that formed the front of his cell.

"No. I was slick. Think I'm danged fool enough to trust any badge-packer? Afore that deputy grabbed me, I hid it. Put it under a rock, wrapped up in a neckerchief." He tried to shake the thick

bars as if to vent his vain fury. "Blast it, if there was only somebody around here on the outside that I knew, could trust. I'd tell him where to find the map and he could have half of that gold."

The Brunnermann men exchanged glances, saying nothing. Then that low whistle came from the roof again.

Brunnermann and the three others leaped to the single window of their respective cells. A rope with a bundle on it snaked down by the window of the back corner cell. The seedy short gent flashed his hand through the bars, grabbed the bundle, and worked it back inside. Metal thudded against the bars as he did so.

Price, across the way, watched him rip the bundle open quickly, and he caught the gleam of gun metal. But before he could even open his mouth, the other man in the rear cell was at the bars, the muzzle of a big Colts gaping right at him.

"Keep yore jaw buttoned up, mister," he warned Price, "and nothin' will happen to you."

"We'll take him out with us," the little one said, passing more guns out through the front bars and around the corner of the dividing wall to the pair in the second cell. "All right. Let's start it."

One of them bawled out to the lawmen down in the office. "Hey, down there! Hey! Brunnermann's sick. Yuh better come up. Brunnermann is dang sick!"

STEPS sounded on the stone floor of the corridor below, then ascended the stairs. The sharp-looking Flowers appeared, toting a lantern.

"What the devil's the matter?"

He moved up toward the second cell. Then the tall man in the back corner cell shoved his arm out through the bars and thrust a gun into the deputy's side.

"Yell once—and it'll be yore last!" warned the outlaw.

Flowers didn't yell. His jaw flapped open and he jerked up on his toes, the lantern rattling against the cell bars. When he was ordered to hand in the big ring of keys, he obeyed woodenly. Unlocking their door stealthily, the pair in the back cell ran out and released the others.

"We better get Curtis up here, boss," said the seedy one. He had hooded, fiercely-bright eyes in a small, homely, beard-stubbled face. "Curtis is tough enough to make a play if he's got his smokepoles around."

The flashily-dressed one nodded and smacked Flowers across the mouth with the back of his hand.

"Do as we say—an' no tricks," he commanded, "or I'll beat in yore skull with a gun barrel." Then he told Flowers to call down to Smoke Curtis and what to say.

Flowers shrugged. "Shucks, I don't wanta die. All right." He yelled down, calling Curtis by name. Then he gave the message. He said Brunnermann wanted to give a confession. He said the sheriff better come up.

In a matter of moments, Smoke Curtis' heavy tread sounded on the stairs. The prisoners were back inside their cells when his head and shoulders appeared, Flowers backed up against the second one. One of the outlaws kept Price covered every instant with a gun shielded by his hat so the approaching sheriff couldn't see it.

Curtis asked George Flowers what was up. The latter just stared ahead, the knuckles of the hand clutching the lantern bone white, sweat like glassy beads on his high, sloping forehead.

"You wanted to see me, Brunnermann?" Curtis snapped.

"If I confess to all charges, will yuh guarantee I won't be hung?" asked the flashily garbed man in the second cell.

Curtis started toward him. He had left his guns below, his holsters gaping empty.

"I won't guarantee a rat like you anything," he began, and then there was a slight rasp as the door of the corner cell slid open.

The next instant the seedy little jasper they all called Ed was out and had slammed his gun's nose into the sheriff's big back.

Curtis wheeled around fast, though he knew what it was. Then when he saw the setup, his mouth shot open to yell the warning downstairs. But before he could get out any sound, Ed whipped up his gun and bent the barrel over Curtis' forehead.

It wasn't a hard enough blow to knock the sheriff unconscious. It just dazed him, and he sank down against the cell bars. Little Ed kicked him in the ribs and Curtis groaned, the pain shooting his eyes open as the other men hopped out of the cells.

It all was worked as slick as grease. They opened up Price's cell and let him out, but gave him no weapon.

"We'll take yuh out with us," one of them said. "Just string along and do as yuh're told."

Price nodded meekly. "Sure, just so long as I git out."

Smoke Curtis was dragged to his feet. They told him he was going to lead the way down and that if he tried to give warning again, they'd drill his deputy, Flowers. Curtis' mouth flattened to a thin seam at that. Fearless himself, willing to risk his own life, he couldn't condemn one of his men to the grave.

"Yuh don't think yuh're going to get out of this town, do yuh, Brunnermann?"

"Just watch us," taunted the fancy-garbed lobo.

When the procession headed down the stairs, it was the bright-eyed, seedy jasper who went right behind the sheriff, holding the gun in his back. Along the first-floor corridor they went, Curtis walking heavily, discouragement in every line of his big frame. Behind him, the others tiptoed. Price was next to last in line, a Brunnermann gunhand back of him.

THE two deputies in the office, Lamb and Hanning, never had a chance to make a play. They saw Curtis stride in after unlocking the barred door. And then they were looking into the gun muzzles of the outlaws.

Pudgy Yucca Lamb bounced out of his chair, half-bald head gleaming in the lamplight as he started to draw. Then he saw the way they had his boss spitted on that Colts barrel and he dropped his arm.

The outlaws worked as swiftly as if they'd rehearsed it. The lawmen were disarmed and handcuffs from the desk were snapped on them. Flowers, however was not handcuffed. He was to go with the pair who were going to the livery barn around the corner. They would go through the empty lot beside the jail and come out on the livery barn alley without having to move along the main drag. They'd pick up the lawmen's ponies and the ones Black Tom had put there earlier that day.

"Tell the livery barn boss to saddle up yore ponies," Flowers was warned. "And no tricks, or every one of yore pards here will draw a dose of lead poisoning 'tween the shoulder blades. Besides, this will be covering you every moment."

And Flowers cringed away from the little derringer the gunman slipped from a pocket in the waistband of his pants. The three left.

Curtis' heavy face worked with impotent rage as he waited. An orey-eyed waddy went down the road, caterwauling "Buffalo Gal." Then the outlaws were back with the ponies, and Black Tom, who'd gone back up the knotted rope and down the tree, stuck in his head to say everything was ready. He was built like an ape, with curly black hair crowding his brows. He leered at the sheriff.

It was as easy as spitting in a creek. The four handcuffed badge-packers were herded out and shoved into the saddles. Price, the horse-thief, was kept covered too. A couple of men across the street stared. One of them let out a yell.

"Holy cow! It's Brunnermann—and he's got the sheriff!"

Doors were yanked open along the road. Men hustled out of whisky mills, reaching for holsters. But then froze on the draw. What would happen if they triggered was only too plain. The hostages hemmed in by the lobos at gun point would get it.

"Go ahead an' plug 'em, you fools!" Curtis yelled. But in vain. His mouth twisted.

Silent staring men lined the street as the riders turned north at the bank corner, moving at a rapid trot. The lobos smirked around.

"Better warn 'em, boss," said the seedy gent they called Ed to Brunnermann as they sighted the creek bridge ahead.

The boss wheeled his cayuse and rose in the stirrups, sneering at the crowd.

"Don't you jugheads get any idea about sending a posse after us," he called. "It'll be plumb bad if yuh do. We'll just blow out the brains of these John Laws, one after the other, till yuh quit. Leave us alone and we'll release these pelicans when we get dang good and ready. *Adios!* And—"

There was the bark of one of Ed's hoglegs. Lead slashed into the batwing door of a barroom over on the left side of the road. A big drink wrangler, who'd been steadying a Colts over the top of the doors, staggered out and sat down heavily, pawing at a red-running shoulder. The crowd ebbed back. The outlaw boss spat into the dust, gave a sign. And the lobos with their hostages were heading for the bridge at a hard gallop.

They crossed it, rounded the elbow of ridge on the other bank, and struck out across the open range. They put about five miles behind them, then reined up on a slight rise beside a stand of timber. Dropping off, one of them put his ear to the ground.

"Riders—a pack of 'em," he said succinctly.

Little, down-at-the-heels Ed pointed back down the trail. Under the wan moon, a line of horsemen could be seen coming over one of the prairie swells.

"Guess we have to teach 'em a lesson, boss," Ed said.

They nodded, their eyes swinging over the prisoners. The boss pushed back his black sombrero.

"All right, Tom," he said, indicating Hanning.

Black Tom touched Hanning's arm and ordered him to dismount, getting out of the kak himself.

"This way, Deputy. We're taking a little *pasear*," He headed Hanning, who looked perplexed, back down the grass-fringed trail.

Then he whipped out one gun, pushed the muzzle against the back of Hanning's skull, and pulled the trigger. Hanning pitched into the dust of the trail, spattering it with crimson as the back of his head was blasted out.

CHAPTER III

Kill Crazy

SOME time later, when the outlaw bunch pulled up again, on a knoll this time, they could see the pursuing posse from Wagon Wheel back at the spot where Hanning had been left lying in the road. Several minutes passed and then the posse headed slowly back toward the town.

"Reckon that was the convincer," said Brunnermann, grinning.

Ed guffawed. The posse was moving unhurriedly, but at a steady lope, veering over toward the broken foothills in the west. One of the possemen led the empty-saddled pony.

Smoke Curtis licked his mashed lips, tasting the salt of blood. When the outlaws had gunned Hanning, he had gone momentarily berserk, swinging at the nearest one of them with his manacled hands. He had received a savage punch

[*Turn page*]

TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER

in the mouth and the boss had sent a warning slug horneting past his hat.

Over on the sheriff's right, Deputy Yucca Lamb swayed brokenly in the saddle as he rode. He too had burst into a fit of rage when he had seen his fellow deputy get that window put in his skull so cold-bloodedly. And Lamb had had a gun barrel bounced off his head twice to cool him down.

"Well, looks as if we'll be taken to the bunch's hideout." Price, the hombre who'd been brought in as a horsethief, had eased his pony over close to Curtis. He spoke from the corner of his mouth with no lip movement.

Price was not manacled. But he still had no weapons. And Black Tom in the rear had them all covered.

Curtis stared at Price, puzzled. There had seemed to be a note of elation in the mans' voice. The sheriff swore under his breath.

Getting captured by the outlaws was bitter medicine for Smoke Curtis, an inglorious end to a career. And it would be the end of his career, for there were men in Wagon Wheel who had never liked him, called him overbearing. Those enemies would be after his scalp now, demanding his removal from office when he got back. And those two rewards offered for the capture of Brunnermann would be lost. With that reward money he had planned to buy himself a small cow outfit when he retired at the end of his term.

But all that was washed out now. The big sheriff now didn't give much of a hoot what happened to him. Bitterly his thoughts back-tracked along his career. For two terms he had worked hard, taken great risks, to enforce the law in the Wagon Wheel country. He had been honest, more than once refusing bribes. He had driven the gun toughs from the town's Whisky Row and cut down the rustling out on the range. He had broken up the fence-line war between the big Beartrack Pool and the rich Twin Spur spread. But one of his proudest jobs had been running the infamous Holiday brothers, vicious gunmen and road agents, out of the country. He had killed one and wounded tough Sam Holiday himself, while taking three pieces of lead in his own hide.

For more than two years, off and on, the Brunnermann bunch had been a thorn in Curtis' side. Slip Brunnermann himself was a heartless killer, a man who would snuff out a life as calmly as another human critter would strike a match. Killing with Brunnermann was like drinking with some gents. He seemed addicted to it. And he was a slick buzzard in the bargain, shifting his activities, hopping across a State line only to hop back and strike again a few months later, swinging from one county to another, but inevitably looping back at some later date. And Brunnermann would do anything if it would bring him a quick dollar.

Time and again Smoke Curtis had led posses after the bunch. He had spent days out on the range alone, seeking to cut Brunnermann's sign, to track him down to his lair. But the slippery killer would lead his pack back into the broken country and then seem to go up in smoke. Curtis had fine-combed those hills without ever finding a sign of a hideout or camp.

Capturing him this time had been a piece of sheer luck. A woman Brunnermann had thrown over had sent in word that the outlaw would be in a settlement down the river from Wagon Wheel on a certain night. But the Law still had not learned the whereabouts of the hideout where the rest of the bunch was.

OFF from Curtis' stirrup, Price whistled softly while he kept flipping up a spent, shiny cartridge shell. The group left a branching side road and turned up along the bank of a feeder creek. Price seemed to miss the shell on that catch and it bounced off his saddlehorn to spin earthward. Well, the little weasel was probably happy enough, Curtis told himself. He was out of jail by a stroke of luck.

The outlaws paused for a breather, watering their ponies and lighting up quirlies. Curtis managed to fashion himself a crumpled cigarette with his manacled hands. He wondered when he'd be set free. Not that he had any hope of ever taking Brunnermann prisoner again. You didn't get breaks like that every day.

He recalled how he had been going to greet Hellfire Sells, the marshal being sent in to get Brunnermann. He knew little about Sells save that the man had built himself a terrific reputation down along the Rio and that he was supposed to be a walking chunk of poison with guns in his hands. Some men said he was one of the deadliest man-hunters in the Southwest, an hombre who would take any kind of a risk to run a wanted gent to his hole.

At the time, Curtis had resented the fact that Sells was being sent in. It seemed like a reflection on his own ability as a law enforcer. He'd felt nobody had done more than he had to run down Brunnermann.

Curtis lifted his head quickly now as the boss lobo walked over to Price.

"Where did yuh say yuh'd cached that map of gold hideout, Price?" boss Brunnermann asked.

"Didn't say," came back Price in his quick, thin voice. For some inexplicable reason, he had become confident, poised. "It was off the trail coming into Wagon Wheel from the northeast. And, by the way, I feel danged undressed without hardware in my holsters."

The boss' eyes flickered. "All right. We'll talk about it later. Let's make tracks, gents."

They neared the edge of the range country, following cow paths through big thickets of chaparral. The moon waned and the stars became smudgy spots in a graying sky as the men moved into a draw. Then they were pushing up into the foothills. With daylight, they made camp in a pine grove in a tortuous canyon.

Brunnermann and his gunhands confabbed for some minutes around a little campfire. Booneville, a town up to the north in a pass that led from the grazing country through the hills, was mentioned several times.

Curtis sat on a boulder, manacled hands fisted, talking to Yucca Lamb.

"I don't care what they do to me," the sheriff ground out. "I don't care. If only I'll get the chance to pay 'em back for what they did to Bob Hanning. That's all I ask!"

The deputy cut his eyes over at Flowers, the other deputy, and shivered a little in the chill breeze coming down the canyon.

"They gotta let us go some time," Yucca Lamb said. "Then—"

Brunnermann's voice cut in at that moment.

"Curtis, yuh can make things easier for yoreself if yuh wanta do something, if yuh got some sense."

Smoke Curtis jerked up his head as the duded-up hombre came over. "What the devil do yuh want, Brunnermann?"

"That town marshal in Booneville. Wyatt Redding."

Curtis stared hard over at the campfire without replying. Redding had been passing through the settlement near Wagon Wheel the night they had grabbed Brunnermann and his three gunhands. The Booneville marshal had thrown in with Curtis and helped him make the capture, mortally wounding a gun-slick named Channing. Afterward, Curtis had learned Channing was Slip Brunnermann's cousin.

"Got a little score to settle with Wyatt Redding," the boss continued imperturbably. "I want you to bring him outa Booneville for me."

The sheriff swung to his feet belligerently.

"Go to the devil, Brunnermann!" he said hoarsely.

"I think yuh'll do it," the other said softly, smiling. "I think yuh'll go in to Redding while we wait outside. You can tell him yuh tracked a couple other members of my outfit to a cabin in the hills. You can tell him anything. Only you bring him out. *Sabe?* I think yuh'll do it. I—"

Once again Smoke Curtis lost his head and tried to bring up his handcuffed arms for a blow. It was Price who jumped in behind him and grabbed him from the rear. The boss blew quirly smoke in the helpless Curtis' face.

"I think yuh'll do it 'cause if yuh don't, *both* yore deputies'll get a window in the back of their skulls this time! An' that ain't just talk. Remember what happened to Hanning, eh, Curtis?"

CURTIS was speechless. The boss flipped away his quirly stub and moved off, swaggering slightly. Ed stepped into his spot.

"Better agree to do it, Sheriff," he said. "Brunnermann can git tough." He spat in the dirt before walking away.

Smoke Curtis tried to move after him, but Price still gripped him from behind. Curtis called him everything in the book.

"Use yore head, use yore head, Curtis," Price said softly. "String along with 'em and wait—wait. They'll get Redding anyway, one way or another."

"You cheap, dirty horsethief," Curtis mouthed. "Who the devil are you that I—"

"Sure, I know what they'll do to that Wyatt Redding," Price went on easily. "But he's *one* man. Do yuh want to see yore *two* deputies get their chips cashed? Yuh're supposed to be a tough John Law, Curtis. Be tough now—and save what yuh can."

Yucca Lamb shoved in his leather-hued face. "Tell Brunnermann to go spit in his hat, Smoke! You can't sell out a man like Wyatt Redding. For every one of us Brunnermann kills, them Federal marshals will hound him down that much harder."

Curtis shook his head heavily. "Them marshals are a heap of wind. It took me two years to give Brunnermann a catching. They won't get him. They think just because they wear a government badge they can do anything."

George Flowers, the new deputy, put in his say, wiping cold sweat from his upper lip, sharp eyes darting around.

"This Brunnermann is kill crazy! You can't condemn us to die like—like yuh'd send cattle to the slaughter pen, Curtis!"

"He wouldn't dare murder all of us!" Yucca came back, a fighter to the last ditch. "Why he'd bring the whole country down on his neck. He knows that."

"Play for time," put in Price quietly, gripping the sheriff's arm. "He hasn't killed this Redding yet."

"What're yuh putting in yore two bits for?" Yucca Lamb snapped at him.

"I'm no killer," came back Price calmly, masking his eyes, "even if they say I got a weakness for horses. I don't want to see you gents die for nothing, that's all. Sheriff, tell 'em yuh'll go bring out this Wyatt Redding. It'll give all of you time. And with enough time, anything can happen. Mebbe they're gathering a big posse down to hem Brunnermann in."

Smoke Curtis kicked earth savagely, shaking his head. "Danged if I'll be a dirty Judas! I won't do it!"

But at midday, when they hit the saddles again after a few hours of shuteye, Smoke Curtis had taken Price's advice. He had knuckled down to Brunnermann, agreeing to go into Booneville and bring out the local town marshal. But he felt like a cur dog in agreeing to do it, and rode with his once proud head slumped on his chest.

Flipping one of those shiny rifle cartridges, Price worked abreast of him and called over softly:

"Keep your nerve stiff, Curtis. The last card ain't been played yet."

CHAPTER IV

Journey to Death

IT WAS the middle of the afternoon when they reached Booneville. It was a fair-sized town, the junction point of two stage lines, where cowmen at the upper end of the range bought their supplies.

They followed the creek down from the hills, walking their ponies in the water between the red willows, careful to keep from sight. At the back edge of the town, a short distance from the creek, stood a tumble-down barn with half the roof missing. It was almost lost in a tangle of weeds and underbrush. Dismounting, they slipped up to it, leading their ponies.

"All right, Curtis," said the boss. "Cut down to the main trail and go in."

Little seedy Ed stepped over to the sheriff's stirrup as the latter mounted.

"Don't try to git slick, Curtis," Ed said. "Don't try to bring back a posse with you. We can see." He pointed down at the road and that side of the town, in plain view from the thicket. "Try bringing a posse back—and yuh'll find two dead deputies! 'Member!"

It was the worst moment of Smoke Curtis' life as he headed for the main trail. He felt he could never do any-

thing baser. Yet he had practically no alternative. At the road, he turned down the grade toward a blacksmith's paint-peeling barn at the western edge of the town. Lowering clouds had formed a leaden mask over the face of the sun. A rising wind whipped through the pass in gusts, lifting curtains of blinding dust before it.

Head bowed against it, Smoke Curtis felt his face twist and impotent rage put a red mist before his eyes. One of his hands slapped a gun butt. They had given him his guns so the Booneville law officers would suspect nothing. But the smokepoles were useless. They were empty, and the outlaws had taken every last shell from his belt.

The screen of shifting dust broke, and Curtis looked up and then half choked. A bunch of riders were coming out from the town. The lead man rode with his sombrero hanging back on his shoulders, fiery red hair plain to view. Smoke Curtis saw it and that black patch over the man's right eye and started to draw, prepared to fight for his life. It was Sam Holiday, the man whom Curtis had once run out of that piece of country and whose brother he had killed. Then the sheriff remembered his Colts were shell-less.

Wind kicked up a dust screen again. Curtis wheeled his cayuse around sharply, praying he hadn't been spotted by Holiday, and went back up the road. He turned into the brush to the abandoned barn where the outlaw bunch was hiding.

It was little Ed who jumped out of cover to throw a gun on him, furious as he demanded to know where Redding was. Curtis started to explain as the others came out and gathered around him.

"Sam Holiday? That big-mouthed tinhorn!" the boss cursed. "I got a score to settle with that rat! I'll—how many rannies did he have with him?"

Curtis couldn't be sure. He thought there were quite a few. He recalled now hearing stories about the bad blood between these two outlaws, that Holiday claimed Slip Brunnermann had cheated him out of some dinero on a deal.

"I don't think he saw me," Curtis said. Then he stopped, puzzled. For seedy little Ed was cursing Holiday along with the boss, only cursing more viciously.

Smoke Curtis was wrong. Sam Holiday had glimpsed him. Recognized him too. Had seen him cut off into the brush toward the barn. Expecting to find the sheriff with a posse, some deputies at least, Holiday had fanned his men out in a semi-circle, then worked in.

One of his men poked his face now through the willow foliage over on the creek bank.

"Holy cow, Sam!" he cried out in surprise. "Slip Brunnermann's there!"

He triggered twice. Shots spattered from the brush between the road and the old barn.

One of Brunnermann's men, a lank one with a knife scar across his nose, staggered back drunkenly and then dropped with a slug in his chest. Black Tom spun half around, hit in the right shoulder. Like magic, a hole appeared in the crown of the boss' black Stetson. Then the Brunnermann outlaws were screaming on the verge of panic, as they jumped for cover.

"Into the barn! Into the barn!" barked Ed as he rammed one of his guns in Curtis' back and shoved him before him.

THEY got inside through a gap in one of the rotting walls. It was only slightly dimmer than outside in the brokendown, nearly roofless structure. Lead smashed in, knocking loose chunks of rotten wood. Sam Holiday's men were closing in on all sides.

"Must be about twenty of 'em, boss!" called Ed as he fired through a gap. "Better give the John Laws guns. They better fight—or Holiday'll cash their chips too. Git the handcuffs off 'em!"

Colts were handed out to the three law officers and Vin Price. Curtis and his men had no choice. If Sam Holiday captured them, it would be out of the skillet into the fire.

They were ordered to the side of the barn facing the willows on the creek. At one end, opposite the big gap where a door once had been, stood the hot-eyed Ed, firing through the gap and able to cover them from the back.

Curtis thought he saw red-headed Holiday himself worming through the

undergrowth, and switched his fire to throw down on him. Hit, the man rocked up to his knees, then dived back into the high grass. It wasn't Holiday though.

Curtis swore grimly through the gunsmoke. If he could get Sam Holiday himself and help drive his men back, then, with a gun in his dewclaw, he might have a chance to make a play against Brunnermann. Even though it might cost him his life, he'd be satisfied if he could simply burn down that duded-up, cold-blooded murderer.

Thunder rolled suddenly above the rattle of gunfire.

Just down from the sheriff at another hole in the barn wall, Price called over. "Slip a shell or two in yore pocket whenever you can. Might have a chance to use 'em later. I need bullets," he called out, lifting his voice.

Ed ran over and gave him a handful, thumbed some more out of his own belt for the sheriff. Both men ducked as a slug drilled through the side of the barn, passing low over their heads.

Price's weapon spoke promptly and a man out in the brush screeched to high heaven as he was wounded. The first drops of rain slapped against the side of the barn.

Somebody outside bawled orders. Across the barn, the boss swore as he saw what was coming. It was a concerted rush. On all sides, gun-slicks jumped from cover and flung themselves toward the place, zigzagging as they ran in.

A bullet nicked Price's cheek. But after recoiling a step, the little gent was back at the opening and firing with deadly calm. For a man who had seemed just a lowdown, broken-spirited horse-thief he was showing a heap of cold, hard nerve.

The rain streamed down in thick, heavy ribbons, blurring vision, screening the attackers from view. The hot earth began to steam. Light dimmed from a dirty, wet gray to a murky half black. Knifing in, holding their fire till they were almost on top of the barn, Holiday's men almost made it. Smoke Curtis had to leave his gap in the side of the crumbling barn and shift to another gap as a gent behind a boulder just a few yards away outside punched lead through the opening. A Holiday gun-tough reared in the big hole by the corner where the door had been.

Ed sent him stumbling backward with a slug in the leg. Another man burst from the rank weeds for the opening. The stocky Ed sprang forward recklessly and clubbed him over the head and shoulders before the gent could throw down on those inside. He went reeling away, in retreat for his life.

The charge was broken. The gun reports fell off, though there was some scattered sniping from the brush. But the ring of Holiday men was falling back as crashing thunder reverberated from the hills in the north. Rain lashed the wind-shaken barn. Outside, it was like a thick, shiny-wet twilight. Inside, they were but dim figures, vaguely outlined to each other. And Smoke Curtis turned, thumbing a few fresh shells he had saved into his weapon, prepared to make his play.

"No," said Price softly, yet with a note of authority. He thumbed over toward George Flowers.

Flowers stood apathetically, smoking gun dangling against his leg, a whipped look on his face. For little Ed had a gun in his side. Ed's bright, fanatic eyes slid over Curtis and Yucca Lamb.

"All right. Drop the hardware," he ordered.

Again they had no choice but to obey. Curtis swore under his breath, nodded to Yucca, and let his weapon thud to the floor. It seemed as if every chance, every thin hope, died a-borning. The outlaws always had the jump at the crucial moment. And the sheriff found himself hating this little, insignificant-looking Ed as much as he did Slip Brunnermann himself.

A BULLET sliced through one wall of the barn as if it were soft wood, whistled past the wounded Black Tom's chest, and bored out through the other wall. Right atop it came the prolonged *spang-g* of a Winchester.

"Holy smoke!" yelled Black Tom. "They're working on us with rifles. They'll cut this place down over our heads!"

"Boss, it's right dark outside," Ed put

in calmly. "Mebbe we better try to slip through 'em and head for the hideout."

It was agreed upon without any argument. The captives were at once herded in front of them over by the big gap in the barn side.

Brunnermann himself put his gun nose against Curtis' back.

"See this?" he told them. "All right. Don't get foolish, or Curtis gets his lights put out. Now move out soft."

As they started, Smoke Curtis caught the faint gleam of another of those rifle shells Price was once again flipping up. There was a little *ping* when it rattled on the barn floor as he missed catching it.

Then they were outside, catching the full onslaught of the rain.

They pushed through the wet underbrush and rank weeds to where they had left their ponies ground anchored. Nothing happened. In the gloom, the Holiday men couldn't see them. There was a clap of thunder as if the sky were collapsing. They hit the saddle leather, Black Tom guarding Curtis till the boss swung up, then permitting the sheriff to mount. There were a couple of gun cracks and the spat of slugs smacking through the barn walls.

Holiday didn't yet know they had quitted the place.

Moving southward, they walked their ponies toward the main trail outside of Booneville. Everything might have been all right if it hadn't been for that revealing flash of lightning. Little Ed was up front. A darker shape detached itself from a tree ahead and a voice challenged Ed, asking who he was.

Ed jerked up straight in the stirrups and shot the Holiday man right through the forehead.

Luck was with them for thunder rolled sonorously above at the same instant Ed shot, washing out the sound of the gun report. They came out onto the open road and everybody breathed easier. And then the livid, flaming lightning gashed open the blackness, exposing them as clearly as if a great beam of light had been turned on them.

There were shouts. A couple of bullets zipped overhead. Ed yelled, and they all threw spurs to their ponies, swinging westward down the trail and splashing through the creek. A few hundred yards beyond it, as the rain fell off to a thin drizzle with the light increasing, they swung into a gully, pushing southward. Lightning sheared away the grayness again as they did. It seemed as if they had slipped away safely. Yet inside of half an hour, when they swung into the narrow rough trail winding among the foothills, they knew better.

They pulled up. The rain had ceased entirely. Above, the clouds were dissipating and an early lemon-hued moon was peeking over a ridge to the southwest. And from behind them came the faint but unmistakable drum of hoofs.

The boss threw away the quirly he had started to roll. "It's Holiday, all right! They saw us head into the gully and knew we'd make for the hills."

After that, they rode hard and steadily. Ed led the way. And behind the captives, now gunless again, pressed the other three outlaws.

The moon climbed higher and waxed, shedding a clear golden glow over the country. And soon the lobos were cursing it. For, as they turned into a canyon and looked back, they saw a bunch of Holiday riders topping the spine of a ridge behind them. In that clear light it was easy for Holiday to follow their trail sign.

The boss yelled for them to push their ponies harder.

A little after midnight they paused for a brief rest by a fast-running creek. The Holiday men were nowhere in sight now. But little Ed was still worried. He said Holiday knew those hills like the palm of his hand.

"Well, we'll be in the hideout afore morning," Black Tom said. "And Holiday'll never find us there."

Smoke Curtis stiffened as complete realization sank into his mind. Over on his right, hunkered down, Price was juggling one of those rifle shells again. Price smiled quietly and gave Curtis a wink when their eyes met.

Smoke Curtis saw nothing to smile about. They were going to the bunch's hideout. And Curtis knew that for him it meant death.

After all, Brunnermann couldn't ever release him once he'd seen the outfit's hiding place.

CHAPTER V

Accidents Can Happen

BLACK TOM was getting delirious from his shoulder wound. He started to rave about a red-headed honky-tonk girl in Booneville. Little Ed walked over to him and slapped him back and forth across the face several times.

"The dang fool! He never knew a redhead in Booneville!"

Curtis was just deciding this little Ed was a heap more important than he looked. And then it happened. George Flowers had, unnoticed, edged his pony down the creek. Working the pony around so the animal was between him and the bunch, he leaped into the saddle and threw home spurs to ride for it.

He might have made it as he bolted around a clump of brush. A couple of wild shots whipped high over his head. Then the slim wiry Price had snaked a hogleg from one of the holsters of the wounded Black Tom. Price leaped up on a boulder, sighted carefully, shooting arm extended. It was all done in a matter of a few seconds.

Price's weapon cracked twice. And, downstream, the fleeing deputy went up stiff-legged in the stirrups and then pitched from the saddle. The .45 slug had passed through the flesh of his left shoulder.

The galloping pony pulled up in a score of yards. And Ed ran down the bank to recapture the wounded man easily. Ed hit him a couple of times and brought him back.

Smoke Curtis felt his last thin hope shatter then. Without realizing it, though it made no sense, in a vague way he had begun to count on the horsethief, Price. Since they had been out on the trail with the outlaws, Price had radiated a calm yet convincing confidence. The slight hombre seemed to exude strength, a kind of authority. It was as if he knew something. Or perhaps had an ace up his sleeve. Until the moment when Flowers made his break, Vin Price had not seemed to be on the side of the Brunnermann bunch.

Now, though, there was no doubt about where he stood.

The boss pumped his hand, telling him it was a pretty piece of shooting. Ed came up and ran his intense eyes over him.

"Didn't know you were so eager to string along with us," he said.

Price shrugged, thumbing at Curtis and the two deputies. "Why in tarnation should I side the John Laws?" he came back. "You gents snaked me outa that jailhouse with you. I don't owe the badge packers nothing but hate. And I reckon I can see which side my bread is buttered on."

They were in a hurry to slope on because the sound of the gun reports might have carried to Sam Holiday and his band back through the hills. But before they remounted, Price was given a couple of Colts plus a gunbelt. They trusted him now practically as a member of the outfit.

The boss tied Flowers' neckerchief over the bullet gash at the top of his arm. That was all the attention they gave him. After a mile or so when he complained the pain made it impossible for him to ride that fast, they simply threatened to put him on foot and leave him behind.

"And you won't have to do much guessing to figure what Sam Holiday'll do to any officer of the sheriff's!" the boss gibed.

Flowers sniveled and whined curses. Smoke Curtis said nothing. But inside he was praying for just one boon from Heaven. That was that before he had his chips cashed he be granted the chance of getting his hands on Slip Brunnermann. And he knew he wanted to get his fingers at the throat of the vicious hot-eyed Ed just as much. Ed, Curtis now knew, liked to kill as much as they said Brunnermann himself did.

Their ponies became jaded and slowed considerably as the night wore away. Coming out of a winding valley, the outlaws bore directly east toward the range country that stretched down to Wagon Wheel. The moon went and they dropped down from the higher broken country, passing a squatter's place.

On the faint wagon track going down the ridge, Curtis swung abreast of Vin

Price. The latter was flipping up another of those bright rifle shells with a crooked, pleased smile on his face. The smile sent fury surging through the sheriff though he realized he had no right to expect any loyalty from a horse-thief.

In the first dirty grayness of dawn, Curtis realized they were heading for a little strip of desert near the edge of the cow country. Twice before he had tracked the Brunnermann riders to that barren stretch of sand some ten miles across. And always he had lost all trail sign there. The shifting sand didn't retain hoofprints long.

On each occasion he had scoured the country to the north and south and west of the stretch. On the east was nothing but rangeland. But he never had come across the lobo hideout.

THEY came to the high, sheer bluff forming the western boundary of the little desert. A narrow, tortuous trail worked down the face of the bluff. They had to travel in single file and walk their ponies fearfully.

It was slow work, the trail switch-backing repeatedly. The better part of an hour had gone when they reached the bottom. Then Curtis was puzzled still more as they pushed directly east over the desert. The hideout must be close now.

Suddenly the boss shot up from his saddle as if lifted by some invisible hand. An animal-like screech started from his pain-contorted face, then was cut off. Right atop it came the prolonged ringing *spang-g* of a rifle shot.

The boss pitched slowly from the saddle to the sands, rolling over by a dwarf cactus. A red stain blossomed on the back of his blue silk shirt between the shoulder blades.

They wheeled their ponies, twisting in the saddles. Up at the top of the bluff overlooking the desert were the figures of Holiday men. The long barrels of rifles gleamed faintly.

"Spread—spread out!" bawled Ed.

He dropped from his kak and ran over to the man they'd called the boss. The bloodstain had ceased to spread. He was already dead.

"They got Charlie all right, blast them!" Ed spat out.

Other shots whipped the sands, but they were yards off. That first one had been a lucky shot. The Brunnermann bunch could not retaliate. They had no rifles in their saddle boots.

"All right," Ed barked, his whipped-out Colts covering the prisoners. "They can't catch us. By the time they get down that bluff, we'll be about across the desert. Come on! Keep riding!"

"All right, Slip," said Black Tom. "We'll make 'em pay for it some other time, by grab!"

Other rifle shots snapped after them as they urged the cayuses on eastward over the desert strip. But soon the bullets were dropping short as the lobos moved beyond range.

They swung around the end of a big wind-piled dune and were out of sight of the men on the bluff top. And then realization came to Smoke Curtis.

Black Tom had called the man known as Ed by another name. Had called him "Slip." It burst on the sheriff. The man who'd just been slain they had simply called "boss," never referring to him as Slip or Brunnermann. It was obvious. He wasn't Brunnermann, that one who had been shot in the back. He had just been a dummy for the real leader, impersonating him.

Smoke Curtis recalled how "Ed," really Slip Brunnermann, had unostentatiously taken control in any crisis, how his suggestions had been readily accepted as if they were orders. "Ed" was the real Slip Brunnermann, the cold-blooded killer and leader.

Then it was that Curtis understood why Slip Brunnermann had always been so difficult to capture, had seemed so impervious to bullets. When John Laws had wounded or downed Brunnermann in a gunfight, it had not really been the leader himself at all. It had been a substitute. The insignificant-looking, shabbily-garbed little man at the head of the bunch now, he with the fanatically bright eyes, Ed, was Slip Brunnermann.

The sun began to spike the watery gray light of dawn with its rays as the bunch rode across the desert strip. Steamy ribbons of mist which floated over the ground began to dissipate as it grew hotter. The horses were now

dragging themselves along and had to be constantly spurred faster.

The riders crossed a shallow ravine and then plunged into the mesquite jungle at the eastern rim of the strip. For some time now they had seen nothing of Sam Holiday and his bunch.

"Now they'll never track us down," proclaimed Brunnermann cockily. His men agreed.

They wound through the mesquite, under the gray branches. And then, abruptly, they were on the fringe of the cow country, and Smoke Curtis was amazed. They had done the last thing he would have believed, riding right out onto the rangeland. He couldn't imagine where, among these low hills, they could have a hideout.

They veered sharply to the left over a strip of trackless hardpan. Coming to Bittersweet Creek, they put their ponies in the water and proceeded to follow it downstream across the cow country. Its banks and the foliage along them masked them from the sight of any riders on the open range.

The saddle-weary sheriff recalled suddenly how the Bittersweet ran right by the ranchhouse of Matt Bridger's Box B.

"Mebbe they're planning a raid," he said to himself as they passed a bunch of two-year-olds grazing off on the right.

But that hardly seemed probable. The outlaws acted as if they were going into the safety of their hidden camp.

AFTER passing beneath a rough wooden bridge, the creek bowed. A little while later, Curtis glimpsed the roof of the Box B through the trees. The creek angled sharply a few hundred feet below the ranch, down back of the bunkhouse.

They reined up and Brunnermann repeated a bird call a couple of times. A man came trotting down beside the bunkhouse. Right away the sheriff knew there was something wrong at the Box B.

The aging Matt Bridger had run the outfit with half a dozen cowhands, old timers who'd been with him over the years, typical, gnarled, bandy-legged cow nurses. But the man coming down from the bunkhouse was none of those. He was a big brute, in his mid-twenties, a couple of Colts in thonged-down holsters on his legs. Sliding out one, he dropped behind a boulder and gave the same bird call Brunnermann had used. Brunnermann echoed it.

"That you, Slip?" the men called down.

"None other!" answered the lobo leader. "How're things? Is the coast clear?"

"Sure, Slip. Come on in. We heard yuh was out of jail all right."

They rode up out of the creek. More gunmen, Brunnermann's main bunch, piled from the bunkhouse, greeting him. One of them recognized Smoke Curtis.

"Holy hades, Slip! Yuh brought back the big badge-packer with yuh!"

"Sure," Brunnermann said. "Figured I'd return the favor and make him my guest for a spell." He guffawed heartily.

Then they were swinging past the corral and up before the main house, an old sprawling place. Curtis and his two deputies were covered on all sides as they dismounted. Curtis had to admit to himself it looked like the end of the trail for certain now.

The front door opened and Stan Bridger, red-faced cousin of old Matt, stepped out. At sight of the John Laws, he threw a hand to his heavy mustache, then glared at Brunnermann ascending the steps.

"Are yuh crazy, Slip?" Stan Bridger barked. "A-bringing them John Laws here!"

Brunnermann told him to stop blowing his skypiece, that he knew what he was doing.

"But when they go away from here, they'll know the set-up. There'll be the devil to pay," Stan Bridger ranted.

"Who said they're going away?" Brunnermann moved nonchalantly inside to the big living room. Outside, the ponies were already being whisked down to the corral.

"But suppose a posse comes snooping around, Slip?"

"What'd make 'em suspect anything? We'll throw 'em down in the dirt cellar." He jerked his chin toward the upper story. "How's the old fool—Matt?"

Stan Bridger was still nervous as he placed a jug of redeye on the main table

of the shabbily furnished room and called to a man out in the kitchen to rustle up some grub.

"Got ornery a couple of days back," he said. "So we didn't give him any grub for forty-eight hours. That tamed him down."

Brunnermann chuckled. "He'll really be a sick gent if he keeps on gitting cantankerous."

Smoke Curtis sat staring at his hands. He and his two deputies, the wounded Flowers and Yucca Lamb, had been herded over to a horsehair sofa at one corner of the room. There was no chance for a break. A couple of lounging gun-toughs watched them. Others passed in and out, coming up from the bunkhouse, listening to Brunnermann boast about the escape and the gunfight with Sam Holiday's pack.

Curtis' big face betrayed no feeling, but fresh rage churned inside him. He understood. Stan Bridger had sold out his older cousin, Matt, and worked hand-in-glove with the wily Brunnermann. And upstairs, Matt Bridger, supposedly seriously ill, was a prisoner in his own ranchhouse.

Curtis felt more impotent than ever. It seemed now that Brunnermann held every last ace in the deck. This rancho hideout had eluded his search for almost two years. No posse would ever so much as suspect the Box B of honest old Bible-pounding Matt Bridger was actually an undercover lobo camp. Not even those marshals, including the renowned Hellfire Sells, said to be coming in, would find them here.

When Curtis glanced up, Vin Price, lounging against one end of the table, guns in his holsters, seemed to give him a guarded wink. He couldn't be sure. But it didn't make sense anyway.

Grub was brought in—warmed-up meat, greasy potatoes, and hot java that had a taste like burnt gunpowder. The prisoners were guarded from the back as they ate. Curtis knew that he was going to make a play, try for a weapon and get Brunnermann—though it would cost him his own life—sooner or later. His lid-hooded eyes kept swinging around.

Fortified by a second slug from the liquor jug, Stan Bridger started to argue again about the advisability of having brought the lawmen there. It was then that Price leaned over, as he exhaled a cloud of smoke, and whispered faintly to Curtis.

"Wait for a sign. The lightning's going to jump out of the jug yet. So—"

He broke off when the leering Brunnermann cut his eyes down to the sheriff as he answered the worried Stan Bridger.

"I got ideas, Stan. Ideas about how Wagon Wheel might put up a pretty piece of ransom for their popular sheriff and his deputies."

"Ransom?" Bridger shook his brick-red face vehemently. "No good, Slip. If yuh let 'em go, we'd be finished."

Brunnermann expelled smoke from a cigar. "Who in blazes said anything about letting 'em go? I'm just talking of *collecting* the ransom. As for releasing 'em—well, accidents can always happen. Fatal accidents!" He guffawed. "Now let me go up and give my regards to old Matt."

CHAPTER VI

A Marshal Unmasked

A SHORT while after Brunnermann and Stan Bridger clumped up the stairs, Brunnermann's taunting guffaw carried to those below. Then, a few minutes later, there were three widely-spaced shots from off in the distance of the range.

Price was out the door and onto the porch right on the heels of one of the gunmen. Smoke Curtis saw Price lift his battered sombrero off his head, raising it high in an awkward-seeming gesture. The weary, embittered sheriff attached no importance to the gesture at the moment.

Brunnermann came leaping down the stairs, raced outside. Men came from down at the bunkhouse.

"Just keep yore shirts on, you lawmen," Stan Bridger warned the sheriff and the two deputies, swinging a cocked gun on them.

The men out on the porch could see

nothing, not even gunpowder smoke. No rider appeared over the swell of the range. They waited for some time. One of them finally began to wonder if they had been shots after all, they had been so faint.

"Could've just been some line rider slapping some lead at them Holiday pelicans," Price suggested.

"Shucks," said Brunnermann, as he reentered and poured himself a fresh drink from the jug, "A posse could ride right plumb into the front yard. And we'd still have the drop on 'em because we got Smoke Curtis here with a gun in his back. Haw-haw!"

Smoke Curtis could contain himself no longer. "Brunnermann, you dirty little sidewinder, if the boot is ever on the other foot, yuh'll have to do a heap of crawlin'."

Brunnermann only guffawed again, tossed off the drink, and said he was going to catch some shuteye. He said he'd take the back room on the ground floor and gave orders about posting a guard.

"Put the John Laws upstairs. Handcuff 'em," he told Stan Bridger, adding that he'd brought along manacles from the jail. "Even a Slip Brunnermann has to rest sometime."

He went through a doorway at the other end of the room to the back end of the house.

Some of the gun-slicks went out the front door, headed for the bunkhouse. Back at the table, the forgotten Price sat building a quirly as if nothing else in the world interested him. Over in a chair, the wounded Black Tom slouched. His wound had been bandaged and he had gulped down a lot of the redeye. Now, he dozed.

Stan Bridger led the way up the stairs, a gun-slick bringing up the rear after the prisoners. Curtis sucked in a deep breath. Now, if ever, he would have to make his play, some way, somehow.

But they had a gun in the back of Flowers, last in line of the three captives. They got upstairs and turned down a hallway leading to the rear wing of the rancho. Then there was the faint thud.

Smoke Curtis wheeled. The gunman in the rear of the line was sinking. Standing over him, behind, was Price, gun barrel lifted for another blow if necessary. George Flowers, the deputy, ruined it. Feeling the falling gunman's Colts run down his back, he flung himself sideward, colliding with the wiry Price who had leaped ahead to get at Stan Bridger.

Bridger looked around at the commotion, and Smoke Curtis threw himself straight at the man's gun. It was nervy. The reckless audacity of it upset Bridger. Even as his eyes bugged, his thumb fumbled, failed when he sought to cock the trigger. Then the wild sheriff was on him, slamming him back against the wall.

Bridger's gun was rammed upward by the impact of Smoke Curtis' chest. Bridger struck at him then with the three pair of manacles he held in his left hand. Yucca Lamb came into the play at that moment, throwing a fist over Curtis' shoulder to Bridger's face. The latter rocked.

Then Curtis, with the veritable strength of a bull, seized Bridger's left hand and snapped it back at him furiously. The three pair of handcuffs smashed into Stan Bridger's face. Blood gushed from his mouth and nose. He went down, apparently knocked out. Actually, he wasn't, but he was deathly scared.

CURTIS pounced on him, grabbing his gun, ripping a second gun from its holster, then tearing at the buckle of the man's cartridge-packed gunbelt. Price yelled encouragement to him. Curtis threw open a nearby door. He and Price rolled Stan Bridger inside, pulled the door closed softly, and turned the key that was in its lock. Price went back over the gunman he had dropped. They wouldn't have to worry about him for some time. His skull had been dented by the blow.

Price came up with the man's two weapons and started to extend them to the two deputies. But Flowers, bleating something about they'd all get killed, was running for the stairs at the back of the hall, trying to save his neck. Yucca Lamb seized the guns.

From below, Black Tom's lifted voice

came, "But I tell yuh I saw that horse-thief Price skulkin' up the stairs! Something's wrong, Slip!"

Almost at once there was a sharp piercing whistle that could be heard down at the bunkhouse. The alarm was out.

Yucca said that if they could hold the front and back stairs, they could keep the outlaws at bay indefinitely.

"No good," snapped Price, a frigid note of authority in his tone. "If they've got us cooped up when the posse strikes, Brunnermann'll still hold the high cards."

"Posse? What posse?" Curtis wondered if he were dreaming.

"Posse of U. S. Marshals, Sheriff."

"What?" Curtis grabbed little Price by the arm. "Are yuh locoed?"

"Blast it, no! They'll be here any minute now. Come on."

Price darted up the corridor toward the front of the house. He scurried around the corner into the main upstairs hall. Then he was diving for his life as shots rattled out like thunderous explosions in the confines of the house.

Big Smoke Curtis recklessly rushed after Price. Two-gunslicks had cat-footed it up the stairs, were near the top, crouched. A bullet put a hole in the sheriff's shirt sleeve. But he never broke stride, triggering.

One of his slugs knifed the front man's cheek, making him jerk up with the pain, his gun hammering ceiling-ward for the moment. Smoke Curtis charged flush into him like a maddened bull. The gent went crashing backward down the stairs, carrying the man behind with him.

Vin Price came off the hall floor, blood leaking from a cut in his scalp, but his legs were steady. With Yucca Lamb hard on their heels, Curtis and Price started down. The fallen pair of gunslicks had retreated to the porch.

Curtis and Price, triggering, sent them scrambling clear of the doorway. Yucca bellowed as he pointed down to the end of the room.

That whistle of Brunnermann's had brought gunmen racing from the bunkhouse and in the back door. From the kitchen, directly behind the main room, they were pouring their fire. Through the front windows more could be seen swinging around to close escape from the front. The trio on the stairs looked like trapped rats.

And then Price sprang over the stair railing as nimbly as a tree-cat and landed crouched. In another split second he had thrown himself behind the end of the heavy horsehide sofa in the corner. From there he threw down on the buzzard firing from the kitchen doorway.

Big Smoke Curtis roared on through the front door. A man topping the porch steps teetered up on his tiptoes, clawed at empty air for something to keep him out of his grave, then plunged backward, drilled through the neck. Another pelican fell back into the ranchyard, lead in his side. Yucca came leaping down to take his stand beside his boss.

The gun-slicks fell away from the porch in the face of that withering fire. Roaring epithets, fighting like a madman now that at last he had a chance, the Wagon Wheel sheriff turned toward the kitchen. One man was down on all fours like a dog there with a piece of Vin Price's lead in his brisket. Curtis' left forearm was ripped open, sending the weapon in that hand flying away. But with his other gun he got the gent back in the kitchen who'd done it to him.

Cursing as he sleeved blood from the head-gash out of his eyes, Price jumped from cover to throw more lead poisoning into the kitchen. The back door was slammed against the wall as somebody beat it outside. No more shots came from the kitchen.

Curtis wheeled to the front once more. Yucca was shouting and waving down the trail outside the ranchyard. A posse, marshals' badges glittering on their shirts, was pounding in, already throwing down on the gun pack in front. Curtis, primed to eat fire now, found his one gun empty. He had thumbed in a few fresh shells hurriedly before. Now he fumbled at the job with his injured left hand.

"Smoke!" Vin Price's sharp voice stabbed through the racket of guns. He, too, was reloading. "Down in the corner!"

It was the door of the end room be-

yond the kitchen, the bedroom where Brunnermann had gone. Now it was opened a scant few inches. A gun muzzle was at the crack. Behind it glittered Slip Brunnermann's eyes. His guffaw came as he realized both men had empty guns.

Curtis drew back his arm and let fly with his heavy .45. Brunnermann fired, but his aim was distracted and the bullet missed. The big weapon hit the door panel and skidded across it, catching Brunnermann on the shoulder, knocking him off balance.

Rushing at him, Smoke Curtis grabbed the whisky jug from the table and hurtled that at the open door. It caught Brunnermann across the knees as he tried to level again. He stumbled. And before he could slam shut the door, the onrushing Curtis seized a chair and let go with that. It smashed the door all the way open.

BRUNNERMANN had dropped one gun. He stabbed down for his other one in its hip holster. But Smoke Curtis was stopping for nothing that day. All the pent-up fury in him was demanding release now.

Grabbing a knife off a plate as he passed, he rounded the table and sprang. A sweep of his arm and Brunnermann's face was laid wide open under an eye, down across the jaw, and to the neck. Another plunge of the arm and the knife ripped deep into Slip Brunnermann's left arm that held the second gun. It clattered to the floor.

Smoke Curtis went to work even as Price shouted at him to stand clear and let him shoot. Though one of his own arms was useless, Curtis lifted Brunnermann off his feet and threw him against the wall of the main room. Dropping to his knees, the dazed lobo leader plucked a derringer from a coat pocket. Curtis' boot swung. The kick smashed into Slip's wrist and the gun was flung away.

Very purposefully, Smoke Curtis lifted the vicious little killer, the man who had ordered the cold-blooded murder of Deputy Hanning back on the Wagon Wheel trail. He laid him back over the edge of the table.

"I could kill yuh, Brunnermann," the sheriff panted. "But I'd rather see yuh hang. So would yore victims."

A gun popped once down by the creek. It was all suddenly silent in contrast to the last few minutes. And in that silence there was the rattle of a spur chain from the top of the stairs. Stan Bridger was crouched up there, steadying a gun through the railing. When they had tossed him into that room before and locked it, they had been too hurried to note that it had a second door connecting it with the room behind.

"All right," he called down huskily. "Yuh're still hostages! Tell 'em to stay out, them John Laws. I go free, or I'll blast yuh!"

"That hogleg happens to be empty," Price stated calmly.

Stan Bridger hesitated, unsure, eyes twisting down to the gun. He had picked it off the hall floor where it had been dropped by the gunman Curtis had bowled down the stairs. And in that split second, with a superb exhibition of raw nerve, Price whipped his gun to level and pulled a snap-shot.

He couldn't be accurate at that speed. His shot hit the handrail beside Bridger. A splinter flew from it and sliced him over the forehead. Stan Bridger had been a tinhorn, a brow-beater, and he lacked real nerve. He thought he was really shot.

Dropping his Colts, he threw up his hands, rearing to his knees, mouthing that he surrendered. He did it so quickly he lost his balance and came sliding down the stairs.

"Are yuh all right in there?" A tall man built like a fence-post, trailed by a deputy marshal, was leaping in through the front door. Beyond him, four-five of the Brunnermann gun-wolves stood with hands lifted under the guns of the posseman.

As the lanky man came in the doorway, the still panting Smoke Curtis recognized him as Harry Windson, rated as one of the smartest U. S. Marshals in the Southwest. Windson looked around the wrecked room, smiled, then strode over to Vin Price hand outstretched.

"Well, Sells, you did it again, I see," Windson said.

Sells. The name rang a bell in Smoke Curtis' brain. Then he almost reeled

with astonishment. The famed Hellfire Sells who'd been reported coming into the Wagon Wheel country. This so-called Price was him!

THE loose ends had been cleaned up. The last Brunnermann man had been run down and caught. Slip Brunnermann himself, now handcuffed for a change, sat slumped in a corner, staring woodenly at the floor. Upstairs, they had located old Matt Bridger in a room, bare of furniture, whose windows had been boarded up on the inside. He had been chained to a ring in the floor. Emaciated, gasping for water, and weak from repeated floggings, he had been given some grub and put in a bed, too weak to be moved. A sawbones would be brought out from town for him.

Curtis and a bleak-smiling Hellfire Sells, the one-time Price, and a few other marshals were seated around the table, washing away the acrid taste of gunpowder with a couple of drinks. Smoke Curtis, still half stunned to find himself alive, was getting things explained to him.

Sells had explained that the government officers had been enabled to step into the case when Brunnermann made the mistake of stopping a stage carrying government mail some months ago. The man posing as a Brand County deputy who'd brought in Sells pretending he was Vin Price, a horsethief, was a deputy marshal, of course.

"But I already had Brunnermann behind bars—or, at least, I thought I did," Sheriff Curtis put in, baffled.

Sells nodded, going on in his quiet unassuming manner. "Yes. But we weren't sure of that because the Law never did get an accurate description of the man. We had a hunch he might have a substitute posing as him. Besides, we wanted to locate his hideout so we could grab the whole pack."

He went on to relate how, up in his cell, he had fed the Brunnermann men the tale of the gold cache. Sells had figured that perhaps they might give him the name of one of the bunch outside to communicate with. Then that man could be followed back to the hideout. Instead, there had been the jailbreak.

"We knew that might happen, since Brunnermann had busted out of so many jails," Sells said. "So we had marshals posted on the trails outside of Wagon Wheel just in case. The outlaws took me with them because they wanted to get that gold I'd talked about."

From that point on, it had just been a case of playing out the game. He explained those bright rifle shells he had habitually flipped and dropped. They were trail markings to his fellow marshals picking up the trail. A couple of times he had even contrived to get a scribbled note wadded in the shell.

Smoke Curtis sucked in his breath as he appreciated now why this Hellfire Sells enjoyed such renown as a man-hunter.

"Then, it was just a case of going with Brunnermann till he ultimately reached his hideout?" Curtis asked, and when Sells nodded curtly, he added, "You knew yuh might be killed, of course."

[*Turn page*]

Many Never Suspect Cause of Backaches

This Old Treatment Often Brings Happy Relief

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. (*Adv.*)

"Men die every day," Sells answered without any bravado.

Then Curtis' face tightened. "But yuh did gun my deputy, George Flowers, back there last night when he might have escaped."

Flowers had been found a little while ago out in the corral, shot through the head when he tried to get himself a horse to escape.

"Flowers was a wanted man," Sells said. "He was a deputy up in Montana and used to take bribes to let wanted men slip through his hands." Little wiry Sells shrugged. "His pulling that fool move—knowing too you might have been shot—gave me the break I'd been looking for, the chance to put myself in with the outlaws. It did. Once I had guns back in my holster, the rest was simple."

The three faint shots earlier had been the signal of the posse when they closed in.

When Sells had lifted his hat high off out on the porch, it was the signal to a distant watcher with binoculars that he was ready to play his hand.

Smoke Curtis rose and put out his hand. "Sells, you pack more nerve than any man I ever met," he said simply but earnestly.

Sells made a sheepish grimace. "Forget it. My luck's good. And I think we'll still call the prisoner yores, Sheriff. After all, yuh've got a murder charge over him."

"Thanks," the sheriff said. That made him feel a heap better. He could still finish out his term with honor.

Sells stood up and shook the sheriff's hand again then. "Shucks, after all, you actually recaptured him yourself—walking into his guns unarmed like that. We marshals like to have local lawmen of yore breed around, Curtis. Reckon they don't call yuh Smoke because yuh consume a heap of tobacco."

Smoke Curtis glowed deep inside then, for he could feel the respect of this tough-minded little gent who was rated one of the greatest executors of the law in the whole Southwest. As Curtis watched him walk to the door, he wondered how he could ever have believed Sells was the meek, beaten horsethief he'd looked.

"And yuh're one danged fine actor," Curtis called grinning.

Then he turned toward Brunnermann for the ride back to jail. There would be no snaky bunch to snag him out of the jailhouse this time.

"Big Mojo May be a Powerful Conjure Man—but I've Got Some Medicine of My Own—Gun Medicine!"

THAT was Walt Slade's response to the challenge that faced him when he arrived at the Caddo Lake legion. It was a country of legend and tradition, a land of "hants" and fabulous monsters. And its people were under the grip of fear because of the voodooism that was practiced by a satanic crew of sinister schemers!

When the Ranger known as "El Halcon" set forth to battle the mysterious killers whose scary deeds terrorized this corner of Texas, he was warned to use silver bullets in his six-guns as his protection against devilish forces. But all Slade needed was quick-draw magic—and that's what he called on in the showdown shoot-out.

Colorful and breathlessly exciting from start to finish, THE LAND OF TRADITION, by BRADFORD SCOTT, presents Walt Slade at his fighting, sleuthing best. It's the featured attraction in next month's issue—look forward to it!

Before Harnes could work his trigger finger, Clint shot

KID MARSHAL

By PAUL S. POWERS

Clint McKay throws a gun bluff on the town of Copper Bell as he stalks the killer of his lawman brother!

THE ugly town of Copper Bell was on the skyline a long ways before the sorrel and I reached it, so there was plenty of time to give things a last thinking over. I did just that until my stomach got feeling empty and sickish. There was the bad chance that I might be killed there, just as my brother Tim had been. I wanted to keep on being alive and healthy.

Of course, Tim had been pretty old —past thirty—but I expect he felt

the same way about wanting to live some more. Yet there were things more important than living to Tim, I guess. And to me, too.

I quit mooning about what might happen and hurried my bronc along. The heat and dust had made me thirsty, so the big wooden windmill that the town had stuck up right in the middle of the main street looked good to me, and to the sorrel, too. He broke into a jolting run in the 'dobe outskirts.

It wasn't until we had both wet our noses, he in the overflowing tank and me at the pump, that I did much looking around. We had been going steady since before sunup. Now the shadows were getting long the other way.

A bunch of cowhands and town men were loafing on the shady corner, holding up the hitchrail and giving my cayuse and me the once-over. They didn't look hostile, but there wasn't any reason why they should—yet!

"How are yuh," I said to no one of them in particular. "Where can I find the mayor?"

They looked at one another and then again at me.

"You mean Amos Fretag?" one of the rannies spoke up finally.

"The name sounds like it," I said.

"Here he comes now down the street," a second man said. "The bank's just closin'. Say, kid, you wouldn't be a McKay, would you? Relation of Tim McKay?"

Friendly acting, he had come up close to me, where I was tying my horse.

"What makes you think so?" I asked.

"You look and act a little like him. Now don't get proddy." The man grinned. "Everybody in Copper Bell liked Tim."

"There was someone who didn't," I said.

MAYOR FRETAG was about to turn the corner when I headed him off and stopped him. He was a tall hombre without much meat on his bones. His long-tailed coat and knee-high boots added to the total of him.

When I introduced myself he gave me a hard, warm handshake. Judging from his wrinkling face and the sideburns that were turning gray, I'd say he was close to fifty years old, but his fine eyes made him seem younger.

Mr. Fretag was full of sympathy. Of course, I didn't want any of that. I told him I'd come to take Tim's job as marshal.

He studied me pretty seriously. He asked me how old I was. When he heard that I was past twenty-one, he looked surprised. For a while he rubbed his smooth-shaved chin.

"We do need a good officer here—town's clamoring for one," he said. "But it's dangerous, as I guess you know. Aren't you the only son your folks have left? What does your mother think of you coming here?"

"I had to argue considerable," I admitted. "But Ma consented, Mr. Fretag, because she believes that justice is, well, a kind of divine law. That's the way she put it. She made me swear on the Bible and on Milton's Paradise Lost that hate or revenge wouldn't influence me any."

The mayor seemed pleased at what I'd said. Maybe he admired Ma's gumption. Anyhow, he said it was up to the town council to decide whether to hire me or not. He said he would give me his support and call a meeting right then and now.

"We did all we could to find and punish your brother's murderer, son, but we didn't have much to go on," Fretag added while we were rounding up the four kingpins who had the say-so in Copper Bell. "Your brother didn't live long after they got him home, did he?"

"Only an hour or so," I said, not wanting to talk about it.

One of the councilmen kept a saddle-and-harness shop. Another ran a store a few doors from him. Fretag told them what was up. Then we called on a saloon keeper named Brandon, finally walking to the edge of town to get the fourth man.

He was the teller in Fretag's bank. This Torrey was a runty hombre with glasses. I could see that he'd be for me if his boss was. He was soft all through, but I couldn't help liking him. All the way back he talked about my brother Tim and how the bank had no protection now that he was gone.

"There was no proof, of course, but

the town thinks that Lefty Harnes or one of his friends did the shooting of Tim McKay. He ought to know about that, hadn't he, Amos?"

"I reckon he had," Fretag nodded. "But in this country a man is innocent until he's proven hangable."

I wanted to hear more, but by this time we were climbing the outside stairway that led up to the lodge hall where the council meetings were held. This was the only two-story building in Copper Bell, though a lot of them had false fronts.

From the top of the steps I had a good view of the frame-and-'dobe town and the wrinkled, puckered mountains that hemmed it in everywhere except on the east. That was the way I had come, where the gray slab of desert stretched out to meet the sky.

OUR palaver in the lodge room didn't last very long. If Fretag and Torrey hadn't backed me so strong, I'd never have been appointed marshal. The storekeeper and the saddler wanted a man with more age and experience. Brandon, the purple-faced owner of the Spur Saloon, sat chewing his cigar most of the time without saying anything, but looking at me from under his swollen eyelids.

"So you're Clint McKay and you're here to take Tim's job," he growled after Fretag had explained things.

"That's right," I said.

"Well, I don't care if you're made marshal or not, but I want you to keep out of the Spur unless I call you in," Brandon said, and for the first time I caught the green flash of his eyes. "Savvy, do you?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"Lefty Harnes hangs out in my place. I don't want any trouble. He's no more guilty of shooting Tim McKay than I am. Lefty is tough, but he's not the kind to get a man from behind."

I said what I thought I ought to. "Your saloon's a public place, Brandon. Whether or no I'm appointed, I'll go in and out as I please."

The saloon man was so sore at first that he jumped half way from his chair. Then he settled back and began laughing.

"Gents, let's make him town marshal," he roared out. "Kid, you can belly up to my bar any time you feel like it."

So I was voted in.

Since I could pin Tim's star badge to the pocket of my old flannel shirt, I went out to where I'd left the sorrel and got my six-gun and cartridge belt from the saddle pocket. Nearly everybody in Copper Bell wore a gun. I wanted authority first—authority for anything I might have to do.

After buckling on my armament I felt better. There are times when your Colt is the best friend you can shake hands with.

Sooner or later I'd have to meet a certain girl—the one Ma had called a jezebel. I'd need some brains then, not bullets. But first I wanted a look at "Lefty" Harnes.

So I put off my visit to the Chinese restaurant where I would see the jezebel, and where Tim had been shot. After I had got me some coffee and a sandwich at the hotel where I'd put up, I went over to Brandon's saloon.

It was dark by that time. The place was bright with mirror-backed oil lamps. It was pretty well crowded with customers. The faro layout wasn't open yet, but stud and draw games were going at several tables.

At one of them Harnes and his friends were sitting. I knew them at first glance. The little bank teller had told me how they looked and all that he knew about them.

Brandon was behind the bar. He hailed me, motioning toward a drink of whiskey he'd poured out. But I remembered what Tim had told me way back. Before I did anything else, I went back to the washroom to see who was there.

Many an officer had got into trouble, Tim had said, by neglecting that little precaution.

When I came out, I didn't go to the bar. I sauntered over to where Harnes was playing cards, and I stood with my back to the wall, where I could see everybody and keep an eye on the doors at the same time. At first I attracted considerable attention. But soon every body settled back to doing their gambling or drinking, which, to my mind, is doing nothing.

Harnes stared at me longer than the others, then he went on playing and winning. It was just a two-bit game of draw. None of the bunch seemed to have much money.

You can learn a whole lot about a man by watching him play poker. Harnes was shrewd, and bold, too. He was a loud talker and laugher. He liked the limelight.

Harnes was a big, rough hombre with a stubble of sandy whiskers on his square-cut face. He wore his gun low on his left thigh. It was a fancy one with a carved ivory handle.

Torrey had described the three cronies who were with him—hard customers, and no mistake. One of them had a round, bald head and a pair of the beadiest eyes I'd ever seen outside a mousetrap. Another ranny—they called him Jake—had the high cheekbones and complexion of an Indian, along with yellow hair and mustache.

The third one, named Larko, I felt sorry for. Every other word he spoke was a nasty one. He was two or three years younger than I, so he couldn't have been as hard as he thought. He'd just had no upbringing.

AFTER raking in another pot of red and white chips, Lefty Harnes turned a little in his chair and looked at me again. "So we've got another Marshal McKay," he said.

"Yes," I said. "You have."

He rolled a cigarette before picking up his cards. I watched while the play went on. I'd noticed a funny thing about Harnes. He had a large fleshy nose. Whenever he was bluffing on poor cards that nose of his would start sweating. Every time.

I decided that Harnes wasn't the man who had killed my brother. He was one of those mouthy braggarts that would kill a lawman, all right, and glory in it if he could outdraw him and shoot first. But he wouldn't shoot anyone in the back. His pards seemed to be gunmen of the same stripe.

The reason why so many Copper Bell people thought that Harnes might be guilty was because of the run-in that he'd had with Tim the night before Tim's murder. There had been an argument right in this saloon. There had been no pistol play, but Harnes had done some cussing and threatening.

Harnes and his friends were newcomers. They had been in town for just a few weeks. Nobody knew what they were up to.

I was getting on Harnes' nerves. All at once he jumped out of his chair and whirled on me, his face all twisted.

"You're a McKay, all right, kid. Darned if you're not riding a closer herd on me than the other one did. Something happened to him!"

The buzz of talk and the rattle of chips had all gone quiet.

"Just what did happen to him?" I asked.

The words were shouting loud inside of me, but they came out in almost a whisper.

"Are you accusin' me of killin' McKay?" Harnes yelled, forgetting maybe that he'd practically accused himself.

He was trying to bait me into drawing my gun, but I wasn't mad or scared enough for that. I just kept one eye on the little wrinkled folds of his shirt at his left armpit, knowing that they'd telegraph any gun-move Harnes made. It was another of Tim's lessons. At the same time I watched Larko, Jake, and the beady-eyed one.

"No, Harnes, I don't think you shot my brother," I said. "But you know who did. And why."

As I walked out of the Spur, there were little beads of sweat standing out on Lefty Harnes' big nose.

The next morning I made my call at Lin Fat's Joss Restaurant. It was a ramshackle little frame building, painted green, with a vacant lot on each side of it. To get in, you had to climb half a dozen steps to a sort of porch and then go around to the side to the entrance.

I paid particular attention to the door. It was solid pine, had a white china knob, and the warping had made it so tight-fitting that it couldn't be opened without considerable noise. I went in, closing it behind me.

The jezebel was there, behind the counter, which was opposite the door and lined with four-legged stools.

"Howdy," I said gruffly.

There was nobody else in the room, but from behind a partition that walled off the kitchen came the noise of a pan being scraped.

THE instant I saw her I knew that she was guilty of something. A good deal younger than I expected, she was on the small side. Everything about her was small except her eyes. They were dark like her hair, beautiful, and as longlashed as a Mexican's.

At first I didn't notice much else about her except that she was wearing a fluffy, blue dress with a white apron over it. There was a large gilt locket —the kind you put pictures in—on a chain around her neck. She wasn't wearing any other jewelry. I noticed her hands were smooth, fingers graceful.

Her face wasn't painted. I don't know if I expected it to be or not. I hadn't met up with many jezebels.

"You're Sarah Foley, aren't you, Miss?"

She was trembling. I thought she was going to run. I could see her throat quiver before she spoke.

"Yes and you're Clint McKay, Tim's brother."

"That's so."

I perched myself on the end stool, the one right across from the door and next to the window that looked out into the main street.

Then I shot a question. "Wasn't it right here that he was sitting when he was shot, Miss Foley?"

"Just about there. He was the only customer. I had gone into the kitchen. I heard the loud sound of the shot. When I rushed out again, Tim—Mr. McKay, I mean—was on the floor, and the room was full of smoke."

I looked at the door again. The killer had opened it to shoot. He certainly hadn't fired through the door. Since the door swung away from and not toward the kitchen, he wouldn't have been hidden from anyone who happened to be looking from that direction.

"You saw who did it, Miss Foley. You recognized the murderer."

I was playing a hunch.

"That's not true." Her black eyes snapped. "And the murderer was sure I didn't see him. He would have killed me, wouldn't he, to keep me from talking?"

"He wouldn't if you were in cahoots with him," I said. "Whose picture do you carry in that locket?"

The girl got pretty white. I knew right then that I'd come too fast and too far. I apologized to her and went back to the kitchen to talk to Mr. Lin Fat. I had to squeeze through a narrow opening to get there.

The Chinaman was his own cook-and-bottle-washer, a skinny old man of maybe seventy, who could talk only a kind of pidgin English. What I could savvy of his testimony agreed with what his waitress had said. So I went back to have more palaver with her. It was easier.

"From what I've heard, Miss Sarah, my brother spent a lot of his time in here. He wasn't the kind to loaf on his job. Why did he come here so much?"

She didn't have an answer to that one. When I asked her the names of the more regular customers of the restaurant, the only one I recognized was Torrey, the teller. The bank was right across the street. He came in at least once every day for a bite.

"Do you know Lefty Harnes and the three hombres he goes around with?" I wanted to know.

"Just by sight. They haven't come in here."

I knew positively that Tim hadn't been in love with this girl. He was dying when they got him home. He knew it, but he insisted on being brought to us. Most of the time he was unconscious or out of his head from the pain of that terrible wound in the spine. He called for me toward the last and said he wanted to tell me about Sarah Foley. It was important.

"Is she your girl, Tim?" I asked him. "No, no, not that at all," he said. "I want you to go and see her, Clint—"

Before he could tell me why or anything more, he dozed off for the last time.

I WAS still sitting in the Joss, fooling with the cup of coffee that Miss Foley had brought me and trying to figure things out, when I saw Torrey coming across the street. It was lunch-

time. He took the stool next to me and ordered beef stew, talking very friendly until it was brought.

"Find out anything, Clint?"

"Not much yet. But whoever did the killing that night was probably recognized by my brother. The door, you see, makes a lot of noise in opening. If he was anything, Tim was careful. I think he heard the door open and looked around to see who it was. Then, because he knew and trusted the man, turned to the counter again."

The jaw of the runty teller was sagging. He was sure surprised. I knew what he was going to say.

"If Tim knew who shot him, why didn't he say so?"

I had to say I didn't know. My hunch sounded loco. Maybe it was all wrong.

Miss Foley came from the kitchen with Torrey's stew, and I rose to go. Torrey motioned me back a minute.

"Thought I'd better tell you, Clint, that I was talking to Brandon and the harness man this morning," he said, embarrassed. "They seem to think you ought to put in more time at your job of patroling the town instead of digging up what's past. Just thought I'd warn you."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll try to keep in mind what I'm being paid for."

As I went out of the restaurant I caught the look that Sarah Foley gave me. How is a man to describe anything like that? All I can say is that it sent a sweetish kind of pain into me, that bounced around in my chest and finally settled in one aching lump. At the same time, I was disgusted—mad at myself and at her.

Tim had been quite a man for the girls. He'd liked them. Well, I'm different.

I set my teeth together and vowed that no black-fringed pair of sloe eyes was going to make a fool out of me.

I settled down to my job of policing Copper Bell those next few days. I had no especial trouble. There was a rukus or two between cowhands who'd had too many whiskies. All an officer has to do in those cases is to keep his head, agree with both sides of the argument, and maybe buy more whiskies.

The worst part of it were my hours of duty. It was usually past midnight before I turned in. I was always back on the street before the stores had opened for the day.

"You'll get even less sleep on Rafter JX paydays," Brandon told me one day at the bar of the Spur. "The saloons keep open all night at those times. Whole town does a roarin' big business."

The Rafter JX was the largest ranch around there. It was the only really big cattle outfit at that end of Apache County. The next pay time, I learned, would fall on Thursday.

It came around, and the town was crowded with men and horses. That night I didn't hit the shucks until daylight. I had no real trouble. The fifty-odd Rafter punchers and wranglers made things lively for a while. The ranch paid off in hard cash.

Copper Bell was as quiet and as lazy as usual when I came out of the hotel Friday morning.

After stopping to talk to Mr. Fretag, who was on his way to the bank, I dropped in at the Spur for a look around. I hadn't seen Lefty Harnes' bunch the night before, but they were at the bar this morning, drinking salted small beers.

The day was already hot, and it promised to be a scorcher.

"How's the kid marshal?" Brandon called from behind the counter, mighty genial. "Give the kid a drink, Joe," he told his bartender.

I figured the beer would be as sour as the looks Harnes was giving me, so I declined with thanks and went out. The Red Star livery barn was nearby. I looked in there to make sure that my sorrel was getting the right kind of care. Main Street again, and something led me toward the Joss restaurant.

FOR reason's, I'd been staying away from there. I didn't want any more jezebel tricks tried out on me. Ma had warned me plenty. But I figured on going there now. I wanted to prove to myself that the girl's eyes wouldn't bother me like they had that other time she had turned them on me.

Sure enough, they didn't. All I had to do was keep my hat pulled down a little

over my face. I took the front stool again.

I'd hardly sat down when I discovered something I hadn't seen before. In the corner at the end of the counter and behind it in a sort of niche was a .30-30 carbine. Even if the initials hadn't been scratched on the stock, I would have recognized Tim's old saddle-rifle.

"I forgot to tell you about that, Mr. McKay," Sarah said when she noticed me looking at it.

"What's it doing here?"

"He said something about a hunting trip, and he asked if it would be in the way if he left it."

"Well, I might as well let it stay for now," I said, starting on the way out again. "Good-by, Miss Foley."

I wanted to get out because, in spite of my hat brim, I could feel one of her long slow looks beginning. While I wasn't a coward, I wasn't foolhardy, either.

So I started toward the end of the street, thinking a little more clearly at every step I took. When I reached a place where the 'dobe houses were thinning out in the sagebrush, the answer to all these puzzles flashed through my mind all of a sudden.

I was sure I knew why Tim had spent so much time at the Joss, and why he had cached that .30-30 there.

It didn't take me long to get back there. Only this time I went through the alley. I came in through the kitchen, nearly scaring Lin Fat out of his wits. He was spooning out a dish of grass with chunks of meat in it. Chop suey, I reckon. He yelled as if he'd burned himself.

"*Bueno*, Fat. It's all right. I want to get through to the front."

I left him jabbering as I wriggled through the partition into the dining room.

"I'm back, Miss Foley," I said.

I didn't look at her. There was too much else to think about just then. Besides, two stray cowhands were sitting together half way down the counter. Both of them were a little tipsy, I thought. The way they were grinning at Sarah made me kind of mad at her. I took the stool near the window, making sure that the carbine was there, and I looked into the street.

There was a good view of the buildings opposite—the Gary and Lopez butcher shop, Smith's Hardware, the stage station, and the Miners and Stockmen Bank.

Of course, it was the bank that Tim had been interested in. Why had it taken me so long to guess it? I had been mule stupid.

All was calm in the mid-morning heat. An old Mexican was driving a still older burro along with a topheavy load of mesquite wood. Brandon came along the shady side, carrying a heavy canvas sack. The Spur receipts of the day before, I guessed. He went into the bank.

Not much else was stirring, but I had the feeling that something soon would be. The ranch payday had brought extra money into Copper Bell. If deviltry was planned, the time could never be riper. I went around the end of the counter and picked up Tim's old carbine, wanting to make certain it was loaded.

The tipsiest of the cow-punchers saw me and laughed like a coyote, stamping his boots as if he had mice in them. Sarah had brought the pair of waddies their bowls of meat and grass, and they had begun to wolf it down.

"Hold your hats, the tin star's armin' hisself for bear!" one puncher yelped, his grin looking as if he'd been hit in the face with a double-bit ax.

"Careful, *muchacho*, it might go off!" the other one howled just as I yanked the carbine lever to push a cartridge into the firing chamber.

THERE was a loud *bang* outside that rattled the window. Then a lot of other hard-slamming reports. I never saw two cowboys move so fast. Chop suey flew everywhere. I never did savvy how they got through to the kitchen without tearing down the partition. The pair was never seen again in Copper Bell.

At first, it seemed as if the street in front of the Joss was full of horses and shooting riders. There were really only four, but they were purposely raising a hullabaloo to throw a scare into the town, throwing lead at anyone who dared to poke a head out. All was noise and dust.

"Clint! Don't go out there, Clint!"

Sarah had me by one arm. Before I pulled away, her little face and dark eyes were close to mine—not that I minded, now.

"I've got to go. I want to."

And I went fast, telling her to get back into the kitchen. I think I said for her to "get the devil back there." Anyway, I ran out around the Joss porch and down the steps just as the riders reared their horses to a stop in front of the Miners and Stockmen Bank.

They weren't masked, but I'd have known the Lefty Harnes bunch even if they were. Jake and young Larko were out of the saddles a second behind Harnes.

The three of them, guns in their hands, rushed into the bank. The other desperado—he was the one with the rat eyes and bald head—stayed aboard his cayuse outside, firing up and down the street with two six-guns. They all were working fast and had everything perfectly timed.

When Baldy saw me coming, he was some surprised. Probably they'd been watching, and they had me at the other end of town, thanks to my using the Joss back door. Until I popped out, he'd been shooting at Brandon.

I'd been wrong in suspecting the saloonkeeper. He was the only citizen with gumption enough to fight. He was in front of the Spur now, gun blazing away, but he was so wild that he came nearer hitting me than Baldy.

At thirty paces with a carbine I couldn't have been wild. My first shot accounted for Baldy just as he threw down on me. He bounced into the ditch under the hitchrack. Of course, his and the other horses broke then, running every which way. I was nearly trampled.

The bandits had worked fast and were coming out of the bank. Only two of them, though. Harnes and the hombre named Jake had bank currency sacks. As soon as they glimpsed me, they cut loose with plenty.

I expect Harnes' nose was sweating some. I dropped Jake, cutting him through the chest just a tinkle before his pistol-shot smashed my .30-30 and knocked it out of my hands.

Harnes must have thought he had me then. He yelled something about "you blasted McKays." But before he could work the trigger finger of that left hand of his, I yanked my own Colt and shot him.

Brandon came running up, and we both hurried into the bank.

Mr. Fretag was all right, except that he acted dazed. But poor Mr. Torrey was stretched out dead by the big, open safe. He had gone out bravely, and he had taken someone with him. Crumpled up beside him was young Larko, quivering and drawing his last breaths. I wasn't very sorry for him, I guess.

"You've saved the bank, McKay," Fretag said when he was able to speak. His face was ivory pale and set in deep lines. "They'd have cleaned us out of everything."

"And the whole town would have gone bust along with the bank," Brandon pointed out. "They pretty near got away with it. Let's all go get a drink. This mess is getting me."

OF COURSE, there was a lot of excitement in Copper Bell. During the gunfight you'd have thought there was no population at all, but now Main Street swarmed with people. By the time the inquests and all the formalities were over, it was after dark. It wasn't until then that things began to quiet down. It must have been after ten that night before I went back to the Joss restaurant.

Sarah Foley didn't have much to say to me. I didn't to her, either. As usual, we had the place to ourselves. Anyone less thrifty than a Chinaman would have gone broke in that place, pronto.

I took the first stool, same as always, rolled me a cigarette, and ordered coffee. After swallowing some of it, I felt better and stopped shaking inside.

"Can't I bring you something else, Mr. McKay?"

I stirred up my coffee again, watching the spoon pretty careful. It was restful, being here. Before that day I'd never fired a gun at anybody, so what I'd had to do wasn't any fun to think about.

"Will you call me Clint?" I said. "I'd like it better."

"So would I," she told me, smiling.

The lamp was on the counter beside

me. In the soft light Sarah was beautiful. Her eyes were like an angel's. I dared a long look, and right then I made up my mind. The gilt heart locket she wore was moving with her breathing, and I reached out with my left hand for the chain, kind of rough.

"You've got to tell me now, Sarah. Whose picture is in that locket?"

Turning white, she pulled away from me, and the locket came unfastened and dropped into my hand. Just then, behind me, I heard the rattle of the knob and the creaking of the opening door.

I whirled on my stool. When I saw who was coming in, I turned toward Sarah again. Only for a second! Her hands went up before her face, and she screamed.

I reached fast for my gun as my body squirmed around and went sideways off the falling stool. No time to draw. At the short range I didn't have to. I fired through my holster, and I didn't miss.

Fretag dropped his revolver, sagged slow at the knees, and went down like a chopped tree. He groaned once. When I bent over him, he wasn't breathing. His opened eyes were like dull glass. This time I knew for sure I'd got the man that killed my brother.

I went outside for a minute and looked over the horse that Fretag had tied in front. The cayuse was loaded down with cash. The saddle pockets bulged with banknotes.

After the long-planned fake robbery had failed, the president of the Miners and Stockmen had been forced to clean out the safe himself, even though that had meant leaving town and branding himself guilty. There had been shortages probably for a long time, and he'd had to cover up somehow.

The mistake he made was in trying to get revenge on me. Ma could have told him that justice is a divine law that it doesn't pay to monkey with.

But things didn't quite dovetail. Something dawned on me, and I was pretty mad when I jingled my spurs back into the restaurant. I remembered now. Remembered something strange in Sarah's look and her cry when she saw that killer coming in.

"Sarah," I demanded, when I had sent the excited old Chinaman back to his kitchen again, "what was Fretag to you?"

After a little silence, she said, "He was my father."

While I stood dumbfounded, she said that her mother had divorced Fretag when Sarah was a baby, and then her mother had remarried, taking Sarah to live with her stepfather. Sarah never learned that Fretag was her real father until her mother died.

All Fretag had ever done for her was to get her that restaurant job. Hardly anyone in Copper Bell knew of the relationship.

"But Tim knew it, didn't he?" I asked. "Tim was always the perfect gentleman. And he knew who shot him."

"But I didn't, Clint! I never guessed it!"

I poked the tears from her cheek with my forefinger, and then I remembered that I still held that gilt locket in my hand. In the light of the lamp, which still had a blue halo of smoke around it, I snapped the locket open and stared at the photograph inside.

"It's a picture of me!" I said.

"Tim gave it to me," Sarah whispered, and all I could see of her eyes now were their dark lashes. "He was always talking of you. I got interested. I guess he was kind of a matchmaker."

"And he wanted me to come to Copper Bell and work things out for myself. I guess I did, Sarah." I laughed as I reached out for her. "We're going to take a trip tomorrow. I want Ma to see her daughter-in-law, the jezebel."

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Word had come that Bannard was dead—yet out of the North rode a changed and mysterious Bannard ready to take the vengeance trail with flaming guns in HOMBRE FROM BOOTHILL, a complete action novelet by T. W. FORD—one of the many quick-trigger yarns coming next month!

LAW FOR SACATON

By CHUCK MARTIN

Jim Marshal takes some plumb tough treatment in a wild gun-roarin' town, but when he becomes the peace officer he proves he can dish out plenty of woe for lawbreakers!

CHAPTER I

The Joker

JIM MARSHAL knew that the victim didn't have a chance when the old prospector called for showdown. A sack of gold nuggets was in the pot, with the hard money and currency. The nuggets belonged to Desert Findlay who had made a strike in the bleak Nevada hills. The money had been bet by Cray Hinton who owned the Gold Dust Saloon.

"Three thousand in the pot, Desert," Hinton said quietly. "What you holding?"

Jim Marshal shook his head sadly. He was cowboy from boots to Stetson, and he knew all the signs. He had arrived in Sacaton that very morning from high Arizona, but Sacaton was a lot like Tombstone. Old Desert Findlay was in the mercy seat with a killer on each side, and one in front of him, and Findlay had drunk most of the whisky from the quart bottle on the table.

"There's plenty more where that dust came from," the old miner boasted loudly. "To the Ladies, God bless 'em. I've got four of the same!"

The two players on each side of Findlay threw their hands in the discard with murmurs of disgust. The tall one was Sudden Tracy; his smaller companion was Shorty Benson. Both were on Cray Hinton's payroll, and the boss of Sacaton paid high wages.

Hinton freed himself and, as his hand whipped down to his holster, he was stopped by a stern warning from the man in black

An Exciting Novelet

"It ain't enough, Desert," Hinton said with a little smile which twitched the small black mustache on his long upper lip.

"Four Queens is enough," Findlay retorted triumphantly, and his left hand darted toward the pot. "I discarded a King and an Ace!"

He made his spread face-up with his right hand, to show four Queens; his left circled the pot and started to draw it toward him. A flash of silver twinkled under the yellow light, and a keen-bladed knife pinged into the table top an inch from the old prospector's left wrist.

"The boss says four Queens ain't enough!" Shorty Benson warned in a low grating voice, and he lowered the hand that had thrown the knife.

Desert Findlay stopped his left hand, but his right slapped down for the old .44 Colt in his worn holster. Cray Hinton stared until the muzzle was slipping over the lip of the scabbard. Then the gambler's right hand came up from his hip with the speed of a striking scorpion.

FLAME and thunder belched from Hinton's hand while Desert Findlay was thumbing back the hammer of his old Frontier model Colt. The old prospector gasped and fell backward with his six-shooter spilling from his hand. He slid to the floor, and the heels of his rusty boots rattled a message through the swirling gun-smoke.

Jim Marshal left the bar and took two quick steps toward the green-topped table. His slapping right hand froze on his gun-butt when a thin waspy voice cut the smoky air like a rasp.

"Throw up yore hands, cowboy!"

Marshal settled his boots and raised both hands slowly. Sudden Tracy was speaking from behind a cocked Peacemaker forty-five, and the brown eyes of the gunman warned of sudden death.

Cray Hinton turned slowly, his smoke-grimed gun still in his right hand. He looked Marshal over from boots to hat, and his full lips curled at the corners.

"Saddle-tramp, about twenty-five," the gambler read off Marshal's points. "Five-feet-ten, a hundred and seventy pounds, and itching for fight. Take his hardware, Shorty!"

Jim Marshal shrugged his wide shoulders and then relaxed. He had tried to play cards in a game in which he had bought no chips, and Marshal knew that he didn't have openers. Not with three fast guns against him, and two of them holding the drop.

Shorty Benson swaggered forward. Everything about the stocky killer suggested a ruthless arrogance, and the tips of his stubby fingers rip-rapped across the handles of his twin guns as he came right up to Marshal.

"Make a pass, you salty long-horn!" he dared the waiting cowboy. "Yuh're a stranger here in Sacaton, but now I reckon you know who's boss!"

"You ain't!" Marshal answered grimly. "You're just a heel-dog; Cray Hinton's the boss!"

"Heel-dog, am I?" Benson repeated angrily, but a word from Hinton stopped the hand that was dipping for a gun.

"Hold it, Shorty!"

Shorty Benson scowled but stopped his hand. Then he reached out and lifted the .45 Colt from Marshal's holster. He stepped back with the captured gun in his hand, and Cray Hinton took it up from there.

"I shot that old desert rat in self-defense," Hinton stated loudly. "You saw the whole play. I was watching you in that mirror yonder!"

Jim Marshal was stubborn. He had seen the whole play as the gambler had said. Desert Findlay had gone first for his gun, but Cray Hinton already had drawn his own weapon and had been holding it in his right hand.

"That game yonder," Marshal said quietly, and it was evident that he was going to have his say. "Findlay discarded an Ace and King. That makes his four Queens high in any poker game!"

"Not that it is any of your business, and I usually charge for lessons," the gambler answered calmly. He reached to the table, picked up his hand, and made a spread with the cards face up. "Read 'em and profit thereby, stranger," he told Marshal. "Four Aces!"

With his six-shooter in Shorty Benson's possession, Jim Marshal figured he had nothing to lose. He glanced down at the cards, and then a spot of vivid color

leaped to his high cheekbones. Hinton's hand consisted of the deuce of Spades, three Aces, and the—Joker.

"You were playing draw poker," he told Hinton, and while his voice was quiet, it held an undertone of savage anger—the kind a man suppresses when there is nothing he can do. "If the Joker was wild, chances are the deuces were wild too!"

"Just the Joker," Hinton corrected smoothly. "You don't like the way I run the games here in the Gold Dust?"

"I'd tell a man!" Marshal answered vehemently. "The cards were stacked against old Desert, and then you had him between a crossfire; you and your hired gunfighters!"

"I'm an even six feet, and I weigh one-seventy," the gambler answered without raising his resonant voice. "I give every man a chance for his money. I'm going to give you one!"

Jim Marshal jerked erect when a broom handle fell and struck the toe of his right boot. A crippled old saloon bum reached down behind Marshal, muttered apologies, and fumbled for the broom.

"Don't fight Hinton!" he whispered behind Marshal.

CRAY HINTON took a step forward and his right boot lashed out. It caught the stooping swamper in the seat of his patched pants, and hurled the old-timer to the sawdust in front of the bar.

"I'll settle with you later, Sin!" Hinton promised quietly, but his voice held a menace.

Jim Marshal held his anger in with difficulty. His deep voice was thick when he growled at Cray Hinton.

"You're going to run out of old men soon, Gambler!"

Marshal's words brought the lightning down upon him. Without warning, Cray Hinton stepped in and jabbed with his left fist. The blow struck Marshal on the right cheek, and the gambler followed up with a right cross which crashed against Marshal's jaw like the handle of a loaded bullwhip.

Lights exploded across Marshal's brain as he sagged forward in a fog. He felt a strong hand catch him. Then a rocky fist smashed sideways across his nose. Thudding boots battered his ribs as he sank to the sawdust, and he felt himself being raised again.

Jim Marshal was like putty as he hung in Cray Hinton's strong grip. Marshal tried to raise his head, but a sweeping uppercut caught him under the chin, and hurled him backward through the swinging doors. The lights went out completely for Marshal, and he did not know that Cray Hinton had followed him into the street.

Hinton stalked up to his unconscious foe like a dog on the fight. His black eyes were blazing, and his polished right boot went back to kick the defeated man in the head. But that killer boot never found its mark.

A blurring tangle of crooked arms and legs in filthy clothes hurtled through the swinging doors as old Sin Bedloe made his senseless charge. The old swamper tackled Hinton above the knees, and the two rolled in the ankle-thick dust with the gambler underneath.

Hinton kicked savagely and freed himself from the little old bum's grip. His hand whipped down to his holster as he came to his knees, but a stern voice stopped that hand before the gun had cleared leather.

"Don't draw, Hinton! You're covered!"

Cray Hinton came to his feet to face a tall stocky man who was dressed in somber black. Sam Brady owned the hotel and livery stable, and Brady was the Justice of the Peace.

"This saddle-tramp asked for trouble," the gambler said savagely, and now the calmness was absent in his voice and manner.

"If he was looking for trouble, looks like he found it," Sam Brady answered dryly. "That don't give you any call to kick him to death when he's down with his head under him, and the same goes for old Sin Bedloe. Who got killed this time?"

"I reckon you're what law there is until election," Hinton answered grudgingly. "Desert Findlay drew on me, and I had to rub him out!"

"You've got witnesses?" the judge asked, but he already knew the answer.

"A dozen of them!" Hinton answered promptly. "Including this saddle-tramp

who is just rousing round!"

"You beat him nearly to death, and you put the boots to him," Sam Brady said accusingly. "I don't know the stranger, but I'd say he will do something about it all. Now you get inside before I place you under arrest. Tell those helpers of yours to holster their hardware, or I'll let you have it first."

"Stay out of this!" Hinton ordered Benson and Tracy, and then he walked back into the saloon.

CHAPTER II

The New Law

SIN BEDLOE crawled to his feet and brushed the dust from his dirty clothing. His weazened face was partly covered by a sweeping cowhorn mustache, and his age might have been anything between fifty and sixty. Not more than five-feet-five, crippled with rheumatism and old saddle injuries, but there was a weathered toughness about the old swamper as he limped to Jim Marshal and helped the dazed man to his feet.

Sam Brady holstered his gun when a lean oldster came from the Post Office and General Store. Tim Curry owned the store, and was Mayor of Sacaton. He wore the rough attire of the range, a string necktie because of his office, and a holstered six-shooter on his right leg.

"Mornin', Judge," he greeted Sam Brady. "You arrest the killer?"

"Give that cowboy a hand and help him down to my office," Brady told Curry brusquely. "He tangled with Cray Hinton after the gambler killed old Desert Findlay in a crooked card game."

Jim Marshal was moving down the street under the guidance of Sin Bedloe. His head ached and throbbed, but strength was returning to his saddle-toughened body. He stopped at a horse-trough and immersed his head under the water. Afterward he raised his eyes to the old swamper's face and stared for a long moment.

"Can't place you, old-timer," he said in a quiet voice. "But thanks for everything."

"You can mebbe pay me back," the old swamper said dryly. "Cray Hinton beat you half to death, but the Judge stopped him from finishing you off with his boots. Get a brace on yoreself now, Marshal. The Judge wants to see you."

Jim Marshal shrugged and followed Bedloe along the false fronted buildings. He was a stranger in town, had disturbed the peace, and they'd fine him whatever he had in his pockets. Then he was standing before the bench in Judge Brady's court room. Brady was looking him over carefully, and after the mauling he had taken at the hands of Hinton, Jim Marshal knew that he wasn't much to look at.

"You're Jim Marshal from over Tombstone way," Brady stated bluntly. "That was your bay hoss branded with John Slaughter's Long Rail iron I saw tied up at the hitch-rail in front of the Gold Dust saloon."

"That's right," Marshal answered quietly. "Guilty, Your Honor. I started that fight with Hinton."

Sam Brady waved a careless hand. "I didn't see the fight," he said. "You fixin' to leave town right off?"

A change came over Marshal. He squared his wide shoulders, and his gray eyes narrowed dangerously. His jaw thrust out and seemed more pugnacious because of the swelling, and the shape of his broken nose.

"I like the town," he told Brady. "I don't aim to drag my rope for quite a while!"

"A man ought to have gainful employment," Brady said thoughtfully. There's a job here for a man with sand enough to get himself whipped, and still ask for another go-round."

"I'm that feller, but what's this job?" Marshal asked suspiciously.

"Sacaton needs a town marshal," Brady said slowly. "Take a dally and sit your hoss, cowboy," he warned, when Marshal was about to speak. "We've had three marshals killed in three months, and they were all good men!"

Marshal stared at the judge, turned to study the wrinkled face of Sin Bedloe, and nodded his sandy head. He didn't have to ask questions when he already knew the answers. Cray Hinton was boss of Sacaton, and he had two

segundos. He stated what he knew to be the facts.

"That gambler and his two gun-packers did for the law, Judge. What's the pay, and when do I start to work?"

"Hand me that badge, Tim," Brady said to Curry. "Hold up your right hand and say your 'I do's.' Jim Marshal, I'm going to swear you in as Marshal of Sacaton. The pay is a hundred a month and shells, with decent interment guaranteed in the event of your demise."

JIM MARSHAL held up his right hand and made his answers. He glanced at the ball-pointed star on the left side of his calfskin vest. Then he smiled ruefully as he touched his empty holster. Judge Brady pulled out a drawer, picked up a heavy six-shooter and handed it to the new marshal.

"Wear this until you get your own gun back," he said calmly, and came from behind his bench. "We'll go up and get your hardware, and have the body of Desert Findlay removed. What you tell Hinton and his crowd is your business. You'll side us, Tim?"

Tim Curry nodded his grizzled head. He was a clean-shaven six-footer with steady gray eyes. He told Marshal to stop in the store and load up with supplies and cartridges. Sin Bedloe said he'd mind the court room, and the three men started for the Gold Dust saloon.

Jim Marshal didn't say anything, but he walked stiff-legged with his spurs dragging. His face was battered and bruised, but his head was high as he pushed through the batwings of the Gold Dust with Curry and Brady right behind.

Cray Hinton was at the gaming table looking down at the hand of cards which had won the pot for him. He was reaching for the sack of nuggets when Marshal spoke bluntly, but with that peculiar authority common to those who represent the law.

"Leave it lay, Hinton! The Law is speaking!"

Hinton drew back his hand and rested it on the handle of his holstered gun. Shorty Benson stood at the left, with Sudden Tracy near the bar over to the right. The gambler stared at Marshal and spoke to Judge Brady.

"You can't run in a ringer like this, Brady. This cowhand is a saddle-tramp, and he can't tell me anything."

"Your mistake, Hinton," Sam Brady corrected him sternly. "Jim Marshal is the new Law here in Sacaton, and the town committee will back up any play he makes."

Jim Marshal was staring at Shorty Benson. He walked over to the barrel-chested gunman and spoke in a hard crisp voice.

"Don't move, Benson. I'm taking back my six-shooter!"

Shorty Benson scowled and shifted his boots. His right hand struck down for the gun on his leg, but his fingers never reached their mark.

Jim Marshal took a page from Cray Hinton's book. His left hand was reaching for the gun in Benson's belt, but he clenched his fist and drove it into Benson's ample middle. Marshal's right fist chopped up and caught Benson under the chin as the gunman doubled over, and Benson sagged to the sawdust on his face.

Marshal reached down and retrieved his captured six-shooter. He set the weapon on half cock, spun the cylinder; grunted when he found it empty. Reaching to his belt, he plucked cartridges from the loops, thumbed them through the loading gate, carefully lowered the hammer, and holstered the gun on his right leg. After sticking the borrowed six-shooter in the left side of his belt, Marshal turned to face Hinton.

"I'm taking that jackpot for the heirs of Desert Findlay," he told the gambler. "I heard Findlay say he knew he held the high hand, which rules out your joker. Any objections?"

Cray Hinton shrugged. "Come easy, go easy," he said carelessly. "Am I under arrest?"

Judge Brady showed surprise when Marshal shook his head.

"Not this time," Marshal said quietly. "You could prove self defense, and I'd have to tell the truth on the witness stand. But don't try it again, Hinton. You coppered your bet with an Ace-in-the-hole, and what I mean is, both ways from the Jack. Don't crowd your luck, gambling man!"

"I'm loaded with luck," Hinton

boasted quietly. "And you?"

"I didn't get killed a while ago," Marshal reminded him pointedly. "You figure it out."

Taking the neckerchief from around his throat, Marshal placed it on the green-topped table, picked up the gold and money and dumped the pot in the bandanna, and gathered up the corners. He thrust the bandanna in the front of his shirt, and his hard face changed as he glanced down at the staring sightless eyes of the old prospector.

MARSHAL covered the face with the battered old Stetson, and his eyes narrowed. The dead man's clothing had been searched; all the pockets were turned inside out.

"The buzzards have been picking the body," Marshal said scathingly.

"I'll pass that for now," Sudden Tracy interrupted. "I searched the corpse to see if he had any identification. Looks like the old bum didn't leave any kin."

He pointed to a pipe, a jack knife, and some small change on a chair. Marshal examined the collection and dropped it in a pocket of his gray pants. He wondered if the old prospector had filed his claim, and Tim Curry spoke quietly.

"Old Desert had a map he showed me," he told Marshal. "Desert told me he had a niece, and he gave the map to the only friend he could trust, but I don't know who that could be."

"I'll have the body moved," Marshal said softly, and then he faced Cray Hinton. "Three of the town marshals were shot in the back," he said to the gambler. "You're a tinhorn and a four-flusher,Hinton. I'm going to try to keep you honest!"

"Take off that star and repeat those words!" the gambler whispered in a low rasping voice.

"Mebbe I will," Marshal murmured. "But say I was killed some dark night, no one would ever know where Findlay located his strike," and he walked slowly from the saloon.

Mayor Tim Curry nudged Marshal with an elbow as the three men walked back to the court room.

"Where at did you meet Old Desert?" he asked curiously.

Marshal smiled and then grimaced as his battered lips twitched with pain.

"I didn't," he answered honestly. "I was just taking out some cheap insurance, you might say. We know Hinton and his gang didn't find the map, and I won't get shot in the back as long as they think I know where the claim is located."

"Old Desert didn't have any close friends that I know of," Judge Brady said thoughtfully. "He and old Sin Bedloe were pretty thick, but neither of them had much money."

Jim Marshal stopped and stared at Brady. Curry glanced at Marshal's face, turned his eyes on the Judge, and the two old-timers nodded solemnly. Marshal also nodded.

"It's that old bum," he said quietly. "They'll try to get him sure."

"Sin Bedloe ain't rightly what you'd call a bum," Brady defended Bedloe. "He takes a drink now and again, but he's no drunk. Been around here three years and never talks much. Old cowhand from the looks of him, and he earned his meals and a bed swamping in the Gold Dust saloon."

"You mind if I sleep him behind the jail in my quarters?" Marshal asked hopefully. "Seein' as he can't go back to the Gold Dust?"

"What you say, Tim?" Brady asked Curry. "Old Sin could keep the jail clean, and sweep out my court room. We could give him a dollar a day and his board, and he could watch Marshal's back."

"Put him on the payroll," Curry agreed without hesitation. "If there's any complaint about it, I'll pay him myself."

"I'll get my horse and bedroll," Marshal said, when Curry finished speaking. "Tell Sin Bedloe to come down to the jail and see me."

Brady nodded, and Marshal retraced his steps. He untied his bay horse, stepped up into the saddle, and rode up the dusty street to the jail. There was a small barn and corral behind the jail, and Marshal was stripping his riding gear when Sin Bedloe came up the alley. Marshal noticed that Bedloe limped with his left leg, and his eyes puckered knowingly.

The old swamper leaned against a post and watched Marshal with wise old eyes. He didn't say anything, but he nodded his gray head approvingly as Marshal rubbed down the horse. When Marshal hung up his gear and turned, Bedloe broke the silence.

"I'm to swamp for you around the jail," he said simply. "And I'm a fair cow-camp cook."

"We'll get along," Marshal said confidently. "But you'll have to strap your hardware on again, seeing that you are to be my jailer!"

"Nope," Bedloe contradicted quickly. "I never wear a shootin'-iron, Marshal."

NOW they were in the office of the jail, and Marshal rummaged through the drawers of an old oak desk. He picked up a shield, pinned it to Bedloe's faded vest, and then he pointed to a shell-studded belt in the bottom drawer.

"Strap that around yore middle," he said sternly. "The Law is speaking!"

Sin Bedloe stubbornly shook his head. A pallor had changed the color of his thin face, and he put both hands in front of him.

"That was Con Wilson's belt and gun," he said shakily. "If a man don't pack a six-gun, he don't have to fight!"

"If he don't pack a gun, he don't make much of a jailer," Marshal retorted sharply. "You'll need one, old-timer. I'm not fooling myself that I'm the only man in these parts who guess things. I know that Desert Findlay gave you the map to his claim, and probably Cray Hinton has figured the same thing by now!"

"Who told you?" Bedloe demanded, and now he was like an angry old rooster. "It's a lie, I tell you!"

Marshal repeated what he had learned in the saloon. About Findlay's pockets being searched, and the guess he had made out loud. Of how Tim Curry had spoken of the map which Desert Findlay had given to a friend he could trust.

"You were the only close friend Findlay had," Marshal concluded. "So you better strap on that Peacemaker. Don't tell me you don't know how to use one. I can read sign the same as you!"

CHAPTER III

Gambler's Challenge

AT MARSHAL'S words, Sin Bedloe's lower lip began to tremble. His thin hands were shaking, and he went to the door and looked up and down the dusty street. When he came back to the desk, he went to one knee and pulled off his right boot. After removing an inner sole, he pulled out a crumpled paper and handed it to Marshal.

"Take this and hide it, Jim," he pleaded desperately. "They'd burn my feet if they knew I had the map, and I'd cave in and lose my head. I'd talk with my big mouth wide open, but you're different. Cray Hinton and those two *segundos* of his will never suspect you have it."

Marshal took the map and walked into a cell. It was almost dark in the street, and Sin Bedloe stayed in the office. He seemed relieved when Marshal came back from the cell, and Marshal smiled grimly.

"Many a true word is spoken in jest," he said quietly. "Seems like I have an insurance policy after all. We'll go down to the lunchroom for supper tonight, and you can get supplies from Tim Curry tomorrow."

Sin Bedloe hastily replaced the heavy six-shooter on the scarred desk. Marshal had been watching the old-timer heft the balance and try the action. He made no comment, but Marshal knew that his jailer was no stranger to firearms.

"Just curious, but you didn't break that left leg falling from a horse," Marshal told Bedloe.

Sin Bedloe stiffened and his thin neck sucked his head down between his stooping shoulders. The strange pallor had persisted, but now it changed from sallow to pink as the blood flushed his thin scarred face. Bedloe gulped and then spoke in a harsh strained voice.

"You know how it feels to be beat half to death, Marshal. You ache all over, and you can hardly crawl when you come back to what you think is life. But how'd

you feel in your mind when you first got back your senses?"

Jim Marshal had not forgotten the beating he had received, but the old swamper's words brought an angry rush of seething blood pounding through his veins. His hand struck down for the gun on his right leg, and his thick voice cracked like a whip as he made his answer.

"I wanted to kill Cray Hinton, and then I discovered I didn't have my gun. Nothing else mattered. I wanted to kill that gambler with my two hands!"

Sin Bedloe nodded and again his hand pushed the gun further away from him on the desk top. Some of the fierce burning rage still smouldered in his narrowed gray eyes, but the fires were dying out under the dominating influence of self-control.

"I won't get myself dressed like a man if you don't mind, Marshal," he said quietly. "A six-shooter comes alive in my hand, and I never could throw off my shots. I'll keep the place clean and do the cooking and such like. You rod the law, and I'll police up this township bunk house."

Jim Marshal listened and became strangely silent. There was a strong sinister force about old Sin Bedloe, and a strange quiet dignity. Dressed in decent clothes, he'd never be taken for the same man. Small and thin, and badly crippled. Something half forgotten was stirring behind those steady gray eyes and the thin straight lips under the sweeping cowhorns.

"We'll go down and eat," Marshal said quietly. "Nothing like a good rare steak to build up a man where he's all wore down."

For a little man, Sin Bedloe had a voracious appetite. He had washed his face, and now the color was glowing in his cheeks as he finished his steak. Marshal also ate with the appetite of the outdoors man, and with good food under his belt, he felt the surging power of his old strength returning.

"I'll take a turn about town," he told Bedloe, and then he smiled as the old man showed alarm. "They won't drygulch me tonight," he said positively. "Not as long as they think I know where the map is."

"I don't like it, Jim," Bedloe said in worried tones. "You don't know those three wolves like I do. They'll gang up and ham-string you like you was a buck deer, and then they'll tear you to pieces."

MARSHAL brushed aside the warning as he gripped Sin Bedloe's gnarled right shoulder.

"That's the second time you've called me Jim," he said gently. "I'd like for you to make it a habit."

"Like you said, Jim," Bedloe answered. "But don't prowl this town in the dark by yourself."

"I've been on my own ever since I was fifteen," Marshal said slowly. "My Dad was sheriff down Tascosa way in Texas. He was killed in a fight with the Wesley gang. They had set the cabin on fire where he was forted up."

"Heard about that fight," Bedloe murmured. "The Wesley gang broke up and scattered, seems like I heard. Jack Wesley was killed that night, if I remember right."

"Funny thing," Marshal said musingly. "Dad usually worked with a deputy, but he must have been alone that night. Well, I'll see you at the jail in an hour."

"I've got some clean clothes in a shed behind Tim Curry's store," Bedloe said carelessly. "I'll drop over and get my war bag. Watch yourself, Jim."

Marshal paid the check and the two men left the lunchroom. Sin Bedloe headed toward the General Store, while Marshal found himself drawn irresistibly toward the Gold Dust saloon. He knew that word of his appointment as town marshal had gotten around, and several men spoke to him and called him by name.

Funny how it made a difference when men knew you, and called you by name. You didn't feel like a stranger, and Marshal no longer felt alone. Not with old Sin Bedloe to help him read the sign. Marshal wondered how Bedloe would look in a clean change of clothes.

Cray Hinton split the swinging doors of the saloon and came outside as Marshal passed the Gold Dust. He leaned against the tie rail and stared hard at Marshal. No one else was in sight.

"You want to get even now?" the

gambler asked quietly.

Marshal felt that fierce flame of anger surging through his veins. But he remembered Sudden Tracy and Shorty Benson, and he remembered the two officers who had been shot in the back.

"Not now," he said slowly, and then his speech quickened. "When I'm ready I'll bring it to you, Hinton."

The gambler shrugged. "When I work a man over, it usually takes the fight out of him, Marshal. If you're in town this time tomorrow, I'm going to kill you."

He turned abruptly and walked into the saloon. Jim Marshal stared through a red curtain of rage, but finally he also shrugged. He was the Law in Sacaton, but if Cray Hinton brought it to him, he'd have no choice.

Marshal stopped in front of the jail office, wondering why Bedloe had not lighted the lamp. When he opened the door and stepped inside, he almost fell over a crumpled heap on the floor.

"I didn't tell," a weary voice whispered. "I didn't talk with my mouth open!"

Marshal thumbed a match to flame and lighted the coal-oil lamp. Then he was beside Sin Bedloe, helping the old-timer to a sitting position. Bedloe's face was battered and bleeding, but he smiled with twisted lips and asked Marshal to push his war bag closer.

Marshal pulled the stout canvas bag nearer to the battered old man. Sin Bedloe pulled a slip-knot, fumbled inside the sack, and brought out a small flask of brandy. He made no apology as he drew the cork with his teeth and took a long drink. He wiped his lips with the back of his hand, replaced the flask, and struggled to his feet.

"They bushed me, them two," he said simply. "They almost beat me to death. Shorty Benson threatened me with that cussed throwing knife he packs between his shoulder blades, but I never gave up."

HE REPEATED the last phrase as though he were proud. Jim Marshal listened and made no comment. He didn't tell Bedloe of his meeting with Cray Hinton, and he sensed the struggle going on in the old-timer's mind.

Bedloe limped to a sink and washed his face. Then he dragged his war bag to the living quarters, and Marshal heard him fill the kettle and place it on the stove. Marshal could arrest Benson and Tracy for assault, but Bedloe had no witnesses to the attack. The two had caught the old man coming through the back door of the jail.

Jim Marshal knew how Sin Bedloe felt. They had both been beaten into insensibility, and Marshal knew that old Sin had been whipped unmercifully in the long ago. Sin Bedloe's spirit had been broken, but he had shown no docility when Marshal had helped him from the floor.

Perhaps the old rawhider had been cured by a hair of the dog which had bitten him. One beating had broken his spirit—another might have restored his old fighting heart.

Marshal turned the light low and sat in the shadows away from the door. He was the Law in Sacaton, but even if he arrested Cray Hinton and his gunmen, he had no proof which would stand up in court. Marshal touched his six-shooter with his finger tips, and a grim smile played around his battered lips. Then he remembered that Sudden Tracy was left-handed.

"That's it!" Marshal whispered tensely. "We'll take those three some left-handed law!"

The kitchen door opened, and a stranger walked into the cell block and came on to the office. Jim Marshal stared with his hand on his gun, and then the stranger spoke in a familiar voice.

"Hold yore fire, Jim. I've come back to life!"

Marshal stared at the transformation. The voice belonged to old Sin Bedloe, but the man he stared at seemed taller and more confident. The sweeping cowhorn mustaches were gone, and the years had been removed from Bedloe's thin smooth face. Now he looked as if he were a man of only forty-five, and the clean clothes fitted him across the shoulders and chest.

"Clair Johnson!" Marshal almost shouted. "You were supposed to have been with Dad the night he was killed!"

"I was with Bill Marshal," Bedloe

said quietly. "But you've got the name wrong, Jim. It's Sinclair Bedloe Johnson."

Marshal stared and then held out his hand. The two gripped hard, and Marshal was surprised at the strength in Bedloe's fingers.

"I'll sit down and take a load off my left leg," Bedloe said apologetically. "Now I can tell you about that fight down Tascosa way, Jim. There were eight men in that Wesley gang, and your Dad and me killed five of them. Then old Bill stopped a slug in the chest, but he didn't suffer long. He was dead when they fired the cabin where him and me had forted up. I got a slug in the left leg when I ran out, but that wasn't half as bad as what happened to me next."

Jim Marshal listened as Sin Bedloe talked in a low quiet voice, of how he and Bill Marshal had recovered ten thousand dollars in loot taken from an El Paso bank. Of the beating and torture he had endured from the remaining three members of the gang. Jim Marshal shuddered when Bedloe told how they had burned his feet over a fire.

"I talked with my mouth wide open," Bedloe confessed in a low shamed voice. "I suffered plenty with my bare feet, and I finally lost my head. I told them where Bill and me had hidden the money, and one of the three fired two slugs into me and left me for dead."

CHAPTER IV

Powder-Smoke Justice

GRIMLY Jim Marshal listened to a story long forgotten by a broken, tortured man who had been found by an Indian sheepherder. The Indian had nursed Sin Bedloe back to life. He had ministered to his wounds with the powerful herbs of his people.

"I stayed with Luis five years," Bedlow recited in a hushed voice. "I didn't remember anything, and even my voice changed. One of those slugs hit me in the neck."

"Nine years ago," Marshal said grimly. "You were with the Indians five of those years."

"Tripped on a root and banged my head one day," Bedloe continued. "When I woke up, I remembered everything."

Jim Marshal leaned forward.

"Everything?" he asked harshly.

"Everything," Bedloe repeated. "I remembered those three outlaws who almost beat me to death. I didn't even know myself when I looked in a mirror, and I knew they'd never recognize me as an old bum. I found those three outlaws after looking for a year. Been trying to get up nerve enough to settle that old score, but just couldn't do it!"

"Cray Hinton was one," Marshal said grimly. "Shorty Benson and Sudden Tracy were the other two. It all adds up now, Sin. It was you who sent me that letter to come over here to Sacaton."

"The only friend I had here wrote that letter," Bedloe said in a hushed voice. "Yeah, I mean Desert Findlay."

Marshal listened and pieced together the puzzle which had defied solution for nine long years. He remembered the way old Sin Bedloe had handled the six-shooter, like an artisan who was a master with his tools. His eyes focused on the shell-studded belt fastened around Bedloe's lean hips, and the old .45 Peacemaker Colt in the hand-shaped holster.

"I'm a killer when I throw down on a varmint," Bedloe said quietly. "You ready for to do the work you're getting paid to do?"

Jim Marshal nodded and got to his feet. He remembered the day when his father and the deputy who had been known as Clair Johnson had ridden away from Tascosa to trail the Wesley gang. Now another Marshal was taking up where old Bill Marshal had left off, but the same deputy was siding the law to clear up some old and unfinished business.

"We can't just walk in there and start a ruckus," Marshal told Bedloe. "We ought to have some sort of a plan."

Bedloe smiled frostily and reached into his war bag. He brought out some soiled stiff papers and handed them to Marshal.

"No matter where or when, there is

no statute of limitations on murder," he said quietly. "These old warrants are still as good as the day they were issued!"

There was now a significant vibrancy to his voice, a difference in the way Sin Bedloe carried himself. His clothes were clean and neatly pressed, and the old hand-made Texas boots on his small feet were polished. Now his shoulders were squared back, and there was a bleak frostiness in his narrowed gray eyes.

Marshal took the old warrants and placed them in his hip pocket. He glanced at his silver watch and remarked that it was almost ten o'clock. Like a wise old law-dog, Bedloe had formed a simple plan.

"You go in the front doors, and I'll circle around and come in through the back," he told Marshal. "That-away we'll thin the target. You do the talking."

Marshal blew down the chimney and stepped into the street. Most of the buildings were dark, but the Gold Dust saloon was enjoying a brisk trade. Side by side they walked, arms swinging, but the fingers of two right hands caressed the handles of law-guns with each pendulum-like swing.

Sin Bedloe limped slightly, but his high-heeled boots added much to his stature. At the corner of the Gold Dust, Bedloe turned abruptly and continued along the side of the long building. Jim Marshal waited in the shadows until Bedloe gave a sign with his left hand.

Marshal nodded and stepped into the light. He could hear the clink of glasses and bottles, the whir of a roulette wheel, and the babble of voices from inside the saloon. He shouldered through the swinging batwings, stepped to the side and placed his back against the wall, and closed his eyes to shed the bright yellow light.

MOST of the talking stopped abruptly, and Marshal opened his eyes slowly. He had heard the fat bartender cough suggestively, and then he saw Sudden Tracy and Shorty Benson near the roulette wheel. Both men were facing him, hats drawn down over their slitted eyes. Hands on their six-shooters, but the guns were still in leather.

Then some one else coughed suggestively from the back of the room. Shorty Benson turned his head, stared for a long moment, and whispered hoarsely.

"It's the ghost of old Clair Johnson!"

Sudden Tracy did not take his eyes from Jim Marshal.

"I don't believe in ghosts," he said harshly. "When I kill an hombre, he's dead all over!"

Jim Marshal watched as Sin Bedloe came down the long room. For a brief instant Tracy flicked his eyes to glance at the intruder, and his mouth opened with stunned surprise. He recovered quickly and spoke from the corner of his mouth to Shorty Benson.

"I wish the boss was here!"

"You're under arrest, Tracy and Benson," Jim Marshal said quietly.

Tracy sneered as his hand shadowed the gun on his leg.

"You got witnesses?" he asked.

"I don't mean for beating up old Sin Bedloe," Marshal answered quietly. "The charge is murder on several counts. Two men were killed in an El Paso bank robbery, and then there was —Sheriff Bill Marshal!"

"It's old Bill's chip!" Shorty Benson whispered hoarsely. "We should have known!"

"Anything you say will be used against you," Marshal warned sternly. "I have the warrants right here in my hand!"

"Better surrender peaceful," Sin Bedloe interrupted. "You didn't shoot straight the night you burned my feet, Tracy. You didn't have a chance to burn my feet tonight when you caught me down at the jail, and tried to find old Desert Findlay's map."

Both men turned to face Bedloe who was crouching a trifle. Recognition came to them as they stared at the man they had left for dead nine years ago. It was Tracy who voiced their discovery.

"Sin Bedloe is old Clair Johnson!"

Sudden Tracy drove his left hand down in a cross-draw to the pistol holstered on his right leg. He caught the out-turned handles with thumb curling back the hammer, but Sin Bedloe moved like a flash of lightning.

Bedloe's right hand swept down and up with orange flame belching from the leaping muzzle. The slug battered Tracy in the left breast just as his gun was snouting over the lip of his holster. He flipped over on his back with the gun spilling from his hand.

Shorty Benson had his right hand behind his head, scratching the back of his head. As his arm straightened with metal gleaming under the yellow lights, a knife was gripped in his fingers. Sin Bedloe bucked his gun down and threw a second shot. He leaned against the gun like a man who has waited a long time for showdown, and then Bedloe jerked his hand to see why Jim Marshal had not cut in on the play.

Marshal was facing the front doors with his six-shooter in his right hand. A man had just entered the saloon, and was blinking his eyes to shed the light. Bedloe holstered his smoke-grimed gun when he recognized Cray Hinton. He also recognized the expression in Jim Marshal's steady gray eyes.

"Don't make a pass, Hinton," Marshal warned. "I've got you covered."

The gambler stood perfectly still until his eyes were once more normal. He opened them slowly, glanced carelessly at the gun in Marshal's hand, and came slowly down the room. He betrayed not the slightest fear, and the little black mustache twitched on his upper lip as he smiled at Marshal.

"You didn't leave town, and now you try a sneak play," he stated clearly. "Holster up and I'll give you a fair break. If you don't, Tracy will get you first!"

"You've got nothing to lose, so take a look over by the roulette outfit," Marshal suggested.

CRAY HINTON hesitated, and then turned his head. His lips tightened when he saw Sudden Tracy and Shorty Benson flat on their backs, staring up at the yellow lights. Only dead men keep their eyes *open.*

"The law will call it murder," the gambler said, and his voice was shrill and high.

"I'm the Law here," Marshal answered. "I'm giving you a chance to surrender."

Cray Hinton recovered his composure. He laughed mockingly.

"What's the charge?" he asked.

"Murder," Marshal said sternly. "You ever hear of the Wesley gang? You ever hear of Sheriff Bill Marshal, or his deputy, Clair Johnson?"

The gambler narrowed his eyes as he leaned over in a semi-crouch.

"I'm going to match my draw against your drop," he answered in a whisper.

"I wouldn't do it, Hinton!" Sin Bedloe warned harshly. "Clair Johnson speaking—Sinclair Bedloe Johnson!"

Cray Hinton jerked erect and turned his head to stare at the speaker. Jim Marshal moved like a cat and was on top of the gambler with his gun-muzzle making a dent in Hinton's middle. Then Marshal reached down and emptied the gambler's holster, while his eyes dared Hinton to make a move.

Jim Marshal reached behind him and laid Hinton's six-shooter on the roulette outfit. He holstered his own gun, unbuckled the heavy shell-studded belt, and placed it on the table. His voice was quiet when he spoke to the startled gambler.

"I'm the Law here in Sacaton, and I'm going to give you a chance, Hinton. I have a warrant for your arrest, and I don't need a gun to take you in."

Cray Hinton wasted no time in preliminaries. He leaped at Marshal with his left fist flicking out. Marshal picked off the blow and beat Hinton to the punch with his right. He turned his head slightly to avoid the wicked right cross the gambler threw, and then Hinton was down as Marshal's fist caught him squarely on the point of the jaw.

Jim Marshal stepped back and waited for the gambler to get on his feet. He was after Hinton before the gambler could get set, and Marshal drove a slashing right to the gambler's long straight nose. Blood spurted as Hinton staggered back, but Marshal gave him no time to clear his head.

Standing with his legs spread wide, Jim Marshal swung lefts and rights to the gambler's face until Hinton gave way under the vicious attack. A flicking left to Hinton's face he used to set the gambler up, and a straight right from the shoulder crashed against Hinton's

jaw to drop him like a pole-axed steer.

Hinton rolled over and covered his face with his arms. Jim Marshal laughed shortly, and his two fists moved in little circles. His feet were dancing with eagerness, and now he had forgotten that he was the Law.

He remembered only the terrible beating he had taken from Cray Hinton, and his right boot went back. Then Marshal lowered his boot and reached down to help the gambler to his feet. Hinton surprised Marshal with a swift left jab to the face, and that treacherous blow robbed Jim Marshal of all traces of civilization.

Now he wanted to kill this man who had tormented him, had beaten him into helpless insensibility. A red curtain of rage seemed to drop down before his slitted eyes, and he drove his right fist into the gambler's face with all his weight and muscle behind the blow.

Cray Hinton grunted and fell flat on his back. Jim Marshal reached down and picked him up, held him with his left hand, and waited for Hinton to raise his head. Then Marshal drove his right fist solidly against the gambler's jaw, and Hinton landed on his back in the dirty sawdust.

Now Jim Marshal was after his man like a timber wolf closing in for the kill. His right boot went back, and then Jim Marshal lowered that boot and shook himself like a dog coming out of water.

"Thanks, Jim," Sin Bedloe said in a husky voice. "I couldn't have stood it, and you and me ain't that breed of cat!"

JIM MARSHAL blew on his skinned knuckles for a long moment as he stared at the unconscious gambler. He walked over to the roulette outfit, picked up his gunbelt and fastened it in place, and then walked to the bar.

The swamper had left a bucket of dirty water standing near the brass rail. Marshal picked up the bucket, walked over to Hinton, and threw the filthy cold water in the gambler's battered face.

Cray Hinton came up whooshing like a drowning bear. He came to his knees, saw Marshal's boots, followed them up to a stern face which was turned down to stare at him.

Hinton stayed on his knees and covered his face. His voice broke as he begged for mercy—for the mercy he had so many times refused to give his victims.

"On your feet, gambling man!" Marshal ordered sternly. "You're under arrest for murder, but you will get a fair trial!"

He turned his head to shut away the fear he could see in Cray Hinton's dark eyes. Now the gambler was cringing and sobbing—a broken man with a broken spirit.

"Anything you say, Marshal," Hinton babbled. "But don't let Johnson kill me."

"The Law will take care of that," Marshal answered sternly. "But it might interest you to know that the map you were looking for is hidden in the same cell where I am taking you. Sin Bedloe, that is, Sinclair Bedloe Johnson will file that claim for old Desert Findlay's niece, and then he will come back here to keep the Law in Sacaton."

"At double the wages, and half the work," a deep voice interrupted, and Marshal turned to find Judge Sam Brady smiling at him. "You and Sin Bedloe both," he added.

Jim Marshal nodded and motioned for Hinton to move ahead of him and out of the door. Sinclair Bedloe Johnson walked at the Marshal's side, and when the cell door closed on the gambler, the little man held out his hand and gripped Jim Marshal's strong fingers.

"Took me nine years to do my part of this job, and it's only taken you two days," he said slowly. "Shake, Jim. I'm proud to be part of the Law for Sacaton!"

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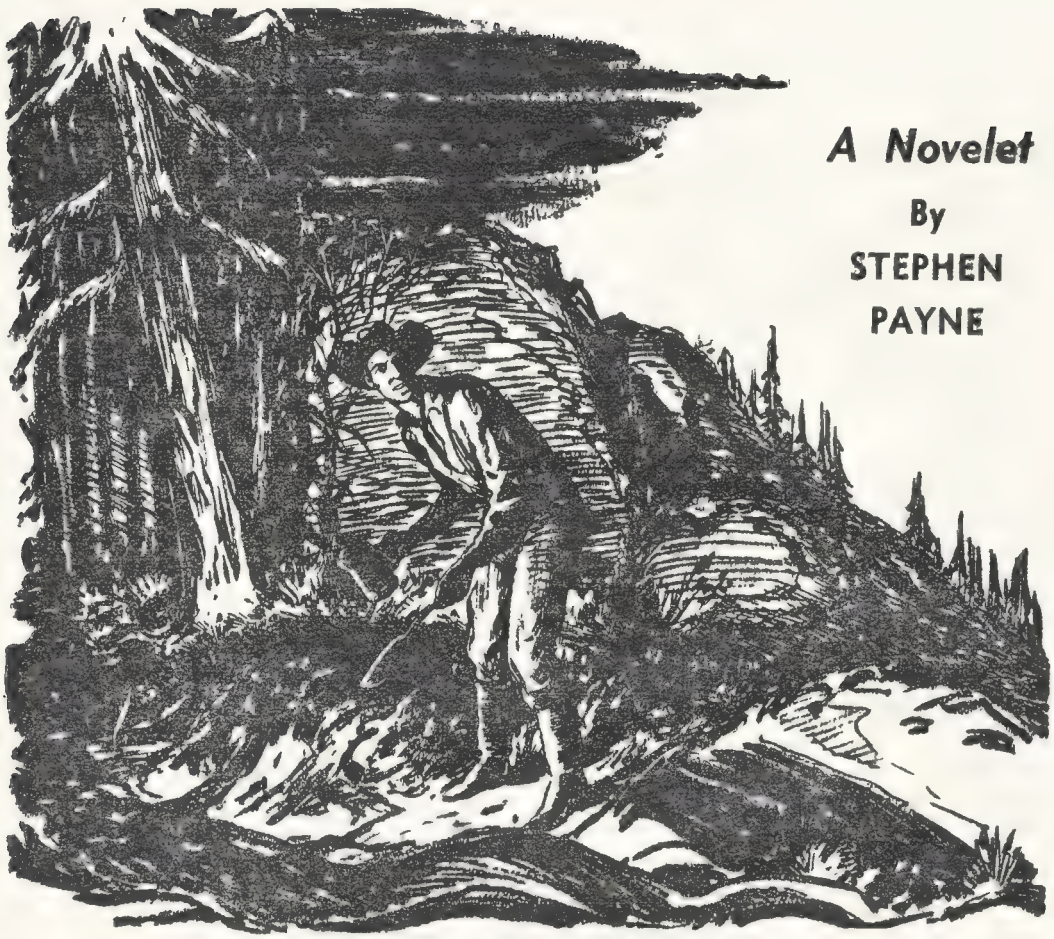
Next Month: To save his wild cousin from going outlaw, Clay Morgan has to use many sharp words—and a few blunt bullets—in THE KEEPER OF THE NAME, an exciting novelet by Allan K. Echols!



A Novelet

By
STEPHEN
PAYNE

THE LETTER

CHAPTER I

Dead Man's Letter

PAUSING atop Scalp Lock Range, Hank Barrows swung around in his saddle and scanned his back trail anxiously and grimly. He didn't want to shoot those two lawhawks. But if they kept crowding him and there was no other way out for him, he'd be obliged to discourage 'em—with Colt .45 slugs. He'd a heap sight rather whipsaw 'em someway or other.

A compactly built man of forty, all muscle and bone, tough as the gnarled pines of this timberline elevation, Hank Barrows had hawkish dark features and challenging black eyes, which nonetheless held in their depths a twinkle of humor. In his youth he had been a gay, reckless young buck, and many years on the owlhoot trails had never quite sombered him or entirely banished the inherent humor and warmth and sympathy of his chivalrous nature.

Longrider Hank Barrows Lingers to Help a

"Stand still but get 'em up!" came the whiplash command from behind Barrows

and the OUTLAW

Even today, Hank Barrows, outlaw, would much much rather have made a monkey of a "badge toter," or given a helping hand to the underdog, than have robbed banks or held up stages or trains. Only last night he had ridden quietly into Pointers, the town which now lay some thirty miles behind him, with the idea of having fun.

Fun, according to his special way of thinking, was the joy and personal satisfaction of taking professional tinhorns to a cleaning in a rip-roaring poker game to the delight of cow-puncher onlookers.

On the theory that he'd be unrecognized in Pointers, without permitting the liveryman a good look at his features, Hank had stabled his black horse, Coally. Before he had gotten far from the stable, however, Hank had seen Sheriff John McCoombs enter the building and begin to question the stableman about the horse. Apparently this doughty old badge-toter knew that outlaw Hank Barrows, worth one thousand

Needy Family – With the Law at His Heels!

bucks to the man who nailed him, rode a big mettlesome black with the K Y brand on its left hip.

Sheriff and liveryman had their look at Coally by lantern light, and, much excited, they had picked up Deputy Bob Tait and had begun to prowl the saloons for the rider of that horse. Thereupon Hank had slipped in at the back door of the stable and left by the same opening —with his horse.

For the balance of last night, and for all of this forenoon, the outlaw had found John McCoombs a hard man either to fool or to shake off. Now however his puckered eyes sighted no one on his back trail, and with a sensation of relief, he pointed Coally down the eastern face of the mountain range.

The trail was poorly defined and the set-up new and strange to Hank Barrows. But the imprints of a pair of hobnailed miner's boots pointing the same way Hank wished to ride, were reassuring. For surely "Hob Nails" knew he could get over this pass to wherever he was going, in all probability, Scalp Lock town.

It wasn't likely that Hank's description was known in this neck of the woods, and maybe he'd find in Scalp Lock the fun which had been denied him in Pointers!

The distinct sound of a shot farther down the trail snapped him out of his day dream. For several moments he was keened and alert. But when no second report sounded, he shrugged.

"What's happened is that my hobnailed friend has shot him a meal," he muttered. "That's all."

A meal? If Hob Nails camped, Hank'd join him this evening and share his chuck. Most prospectors, young or old, were pretty good hombres. Hank called all prospectors "Hob Nails" because of the boots they wore. A man on the dodge could be sure they'd not run off at the mouth after a fellow had parted company with 'em. Rounding up bandits wasn't their business.

The sun, though now cloud-hidden, was still two hours high when Hank Barrows' horse, swinging down along a rock-and-cedar studded ridge with a deep canyon at its right, stopped abruptly and sniffed. It was characteristic of this well trained animal that he did not snort or whinny, although he definitely told his rider he'd smelled blood.

With his keen eyes the wary outlaw raked the country ahead, and to right and left, before he stepped down from his saddle and cut for sign. Hob Nails had come to a sudden halt. Then he had fallen and had spilled a small amount of blood. Another man had walked to this spot and it was obvious he had dragged Hob Nails' body to the rim of the canyon and pushed it over. He had come back and had picked up something else to take to the rim and there dispose of it.

Hank's dark eyes glinted with anger. He had a code of sorts which made him loathe and despise drygulchers. Mounting he rode a hundred and fifty yards down the ridge, and discovered that the killer had kept his horse concealed behind a stand of spruces. The man had ridden up this trail from the lower country. His job finished, he had mounted his horse and returned the same way.

The outlaw's immediate impulse was to trail the killer and even the score for the luckless prospector. But first he must find out if the man who, in cold blood, had been shot from ambush, was dead. Might be he wasn't—yet—and could either name or describe the drygulcher. He might even give a reason why the cur had done this job, too. Hank Barrows wasn't the sort of fellow who'd leave a wounded man unaided.

He gave the cloudy mountain skyline his narrow-eyed attention, and when he failed to see McCoombs and his deputy, he made use of his rope to lower himself into the canyon. The victim, he discovered, had been shot through the head and had probably died instantly.

The bandit's first reaction to his look at the victim was a start of amazement. This prospector, both in build and appearance, looked very much like Hank Barrows—even to the two-day-old black whisker stubble on his cheeks. This resemblance planted a thought in Hank's brain which at first he rejected as being just too fantastic.

But in Hank's hazardous life, he fought and gambled continually for self preservation. Hunted as a wolf is hunted, he took long and desperate chances with

lawmen, gambling his life on some ruse which, if successful, permitted him to escape from a trap. Hoodwinking lawmen was a game he loved.

There was nothing on the body by which to identify it, and if the prospector had carried anything of value, it was now missing. A six-shooter and a water canteen were attached to his belt, and obviously he had carried on his shoulders a rather heavy pack sack.

This sack was the something which the killer had thrown over the rim after he had disposed of the body. It contained camp utensils and a small amount of food, a blanket and a slicker, matches, tobacco, a half dozen quartz specimens. And, tucked away in a pocket, Hank Barrows found a letter. Surmising that this was something the drygulcher had failed to find, his eyes sparkled and his nostrils quivered. This letter would surely identify the murdered man, and might also give a clue of the killer's identity.

A sudden downpour of rain, one of those short, fierce mountain storms, forced the outlaw to seek cover against the canyon wall. Here he scrutinized the envelope. Postmarked "Scalp Lock, June 14," it was addressed to "Mr. Pay Dirt Jake Ritter, Goldflume." Today, Hank recalled, was June the 24th. He read the letter:

Dear Pay Dirt Jake:

I'm going to call you Jake because Daddy always spoke so nicely of you. Now that we have heard such wonderfully good news from you, Mother and Larry and I, and Chuck Miles—Chuck is the cowboy I'm fond of—feel that we know you even if we've never seen you.

It's too bad Daddy won't be here to greet you. He died two years ago and Mother had given up hope that anybody he'd grubstaked would strike it rich. But, oh boy! Your grand letter says that quick as you close the deal for your mine you'll bring us our half of twenty thousand dollars! Though I still can't believe it.

We're all hoping my letter will hurry your coming because that horrible Clayton Seymour has got us in a vise. He will kick us out and take the T H ranch unless we pay him four thousand dollars on June 26. After the hard winter when we lost nearly all our cattle, Daddy had to borrow money from Seymour.

We've never been able to pay all of the monthly four percent interest, so by now Mother has sold everything except the ranch—the old place that means home to her and to all of us. So you see what hope your letter brought her. Larry's too young to understand all this, but did it give Chuck and me a lift!

Jake, I wish you could have seen that smug, oily Seymour's face when Mother showed him your letter. Chuck said it was plain he wanted the T H lots more than he wanted the money we owe him. There's so much I want to tell you, but I'll keep it until I see you. Hurry and get here by noon of June 26, won't you?

Affectionately yours,
Betty Gray.

P. S. Mother and Larry send their best and Chuck wants to meet you as much as I do.

Outlaw Hank Barrows blinked and rubbed a knotty hand across his eyes. Then he put his forefinger on the line which read in part, "Twenty thousand dollars," and moved the finger to another line reading, "—Seymour's face when Mother showed him your letter."

He nodded twice and savage glints replaced the warmth which had been glowing in his hawkish dark eyes. As if speaking directly to the girl who had written the letter, he said:

"Betty, I'm promisin' you now that you and your mother and Larry'll get the stake Pay Dirt was bringin' to you. And you, Jake Ritter," looking at the dead man, "I'm promisin' you too, that Seymour'll get it in the neck. Seems like that coyote must have studied a map and figured out that a man travelin' from Goldflume to Scalp Lock by the shortest trail would come over this pass."

JERKING his thoughts back to his immediate problem, and remembering Sheriff McCoombs, Hank hurriedly climbed to the ridge above the canyon. The storm had passed, and in the far distance against the western skyline he saw two horsemen. McCoombs and Tait were still on his trail. Seeing them at all was a lucky break for the bandit, for they remained in sight only a moment.

Rain had now blotted the drygulcher's tracks and those of his horse, which meant that, even if Hank Barrows had not been an outlaw and a wanted man, his story would not be credible to the lawmen. The officers would chouse up the plan and queer the job he must now do, unless— He grinned with anticipation.

"Unless I take a long-shot gamble to whipsaw 'em."

CHAPTER II

Deaf Prospector

SWIFTLY, purposefully, the outlaw set to work, and an hour later, as darkness clamped down on the mountains, a campfire glowed on the ridge a short distance above the spot where Pay Dirt Jake had met death. Jake Ritter's pack sack, now open and its contents strewn about, lay near the fire. Jake's belt and gun had been tossed on the sack, and Hank Barrows, wearing the prospector's hob-nailed boots, soiled corduroys, blue flannel shirt and black slouch hat, was preparing a meal. The outlaw's horse, saddle, gun and his own clothing were not in sight.

Up country a short distance, shod hoofs clicked against rocks. But Hank did not look up from the frying pan in which was sizzling a cottontail rabbit. Nevertheless he heard two horsemen coming on slowly, almost silently and he grinned with sardonic humor.

He drew the tiny coffee pot off the coals and opened its lid to cool the brew. He picked up a piece of rabbit, salted it and began to eat.

From darkness behind him came a whiplash command, "Stand still, but get 'em up, Barrows!"

Hank Barrows lifted the coffee pot to his lips, he set it down and selected another piece of rabbit.

"Can't you hear me?" roared Sheriff John McCoombs.

"Huh?" Hank turned his head. "Why, hello, gents?" He spoke as if he had just discovered the presence of his visitors and had not noticed their drawn guns. "Did you sing out, 'Hello, the camp?' Shucks, if you had, I'd likely not have heard yuh. Come on in."

Giving him their studied attention, the two lawmen drew closer. John McCoombs was solid and forty, with a clipped brown mustache and shrewd blue eyes. His deputy, Bob Tait, was young, rangy and lantern-jawed. It was a tense moment for Hank. If they had a good description of him, the game was lost. However, now that they could see him clearly, he knew they were uncertain of his identity. He broke the tight silence.

"I can make some fry pan bread and cook what little bacon I got, boys. Light off. I sure am glad to see company. Hey! That badge. Are you a lawman?" he asked McCoombs.

McCoombs snapped, "You blamed well know I'm a sheriff and that I've been on your trail nigh twenty-four hours, Hank Barrows. I warn you this gun's on a hair trigger. Where's yore black horse?"

Deputy Bob Tait began to circle around the camp, apparently in hopes of finding the horse.

Hank cupped his right hand to his ear and looked inquiringly at McCoombs. "What did you say?"

The sheriff scowled with annoyance. "I asked where's your horse?" he yelled.

"Horse?" Hank pointed toward the mountains. "If you come on that trail, you must have seed my foot tracks. I'm a prospector. I use my own hoofs."

"Yeah? Well, did you see a man on a black horse?"

The bandit nodded. "Uh-huh. He caught up to me and passed me a little bit afore dark."

"Did you know who he was?"

"What say, sheriff?"

McCoombs swore and then roared. "Did you know him? What'd he say?"

Hank shook his head. "Stranger to me. He just waved and kept ridin'. But you know, less'n half a mile farther 'long, I seed him cut sharp to the right and head 'cross the canyon and into the timber."

"Shucks!" gritted the lawman. "If he's taken to the woods, we'll never— Find anything, Bob?" to his returning deputy.

"Too dark to read trail sign, and that horse sure ain't close here or it'd whinny to our broncs. D' you still suspicion this old coot is Barrows?"

"I'll pump him some more," said McCoombs. "But on the trail ahead of the bandit, there sure enough was a man a-foot wearin' hob-nailed boots. Hi, you!" he was yelling at Hank. "What's your name? Where'd you come from? Where you goin?"

"I asked you fellers to light and eat with me, but danged if you ain't makin'

me mad!" returned Hank pretending indignation. "Sure, I see you're a lawman. But that don't give you no right to pester—"

"Keep your shirt on," admonished the disgruntled sheriff. "We're sore because we almost had Hank Barrows run down, but night has given him a chance to give us the slip."

"We'd sure go for a meal, Uncle," Tait shouted. "We headed out of Pointers in a hurry without even a lunch. Didn't you come through Pointers?"

"Pointers? Nope. I'm from Goldflume and I cut across 'most as the crow flies." Still ignoring McCoombs' gun, Hank began mixing water from Jake Ritter's canteen with flour on the only tin plate. He looked up from this task, grinning amiably.

"Now you're minded to be sociable, gents, I don't mind tellin' you I'm knowed as Pay Dirt Jake. Hey! This here letter will explain me to you fellers better'n I can." He fished Betty Gray's letter from his hip pocket.

Both lawmen dismounted and with heads close together, read the letter.

"Gosh!" exclaimed the deputy. "This prospector did strike it rich. That's what all of 'em dream about and what keeps 'em goin'. And now Jake's headin' to the T H ranch to repay a grubstake. Sorta gets me, John."

"Me, too," said the grim McCoombs. "Pay Dirt Jake, I'm sorry we rubbed you the wrong way."

When Hank, busy with his simple cooking at the camp fire, gave no sign that he had heard, the lawman continued. "I've heard plenty about this Clayton Seymour," McCoombs said. "Loan shark. When he hooks a man the poor fellow works for Seymour the rest of his life. I've got more respect for a bandit who uses a gun for his robbery than for that buzzard."

McCoombs tapped the letter. "But what a good thing it was for Jake that Hank Barrows never suspected he carried a wad of cash."

Bob Tait nodded gravely. "That bandit would have shot him down like a coyote to rob him."

Hank Barrows hid a flash of hot anger. If McCoombs and Tait were to find Pay Dirt Jake's body, they'd see through the game Hank was playing, impersonating the prospector, and they'd be sure to believe he had murdered Jake Ritter. He must persuade the two lawmen to leave this spot before daylight tomorrow. If not, they'd find the body because although Hank had covered it over with rocks, magpies and crows would point the way to it. Nor was this all Hank had to worry about. If McCoombs and Tait resumed their hunt for him tomorrow, they'd soon find where he had hidden his horse.

"Grab a root and growl," he called. "Ain't much to eat, but what there is is awful good. You'll have to gulp your coffee right out of the pot."

The meal over, the two men staked out their horses for the night and announced that they'd bed down by Jake's fire and take up their man hunt in the morning.

Hank whittled tobacco from Pay Dirt Jake's dried-out plug, loaded it in Jake's pipe and smoked in silence. Although he'd hookwinked McCoombs, he was in one tight spot.

Eventually however all three men lay down by the fire, McCoombs and Tait using their saddles and saddle blankets for beds, Hank using Jake's slicker and blanket and the pack sack.

He stretched out, pulled his blanket up over him.

"Going to rain, about two o'clock," he remarked, off-handedly.

"Rain? You're sure of that, Uncle?" Tait showed alarmed interest.

Hank pretended he didn't hear.

"These old prospectors and trappers are the best weather prophets you ever saw, Bob," McCoombs said. "Shucks, if it rains in the night, we won't have a show of cutting Barrows' trail."

"He's getting all night to put rough country between him and us," commented the deputy. "Why don't we go home right now and get into a decent bed?"

"I never quit till I know I'm licked," said McCoombs. "We'll wait and see how things turn out."

Rain—a break for Hank—began to fall at two o'clock. When it turned to hail the three men bunched up miserably around the fire which hissed or sputtered, and finally—in spite of their hunt

for dry wood in the darkness and the storm—went out entirely.

Hank said to the devil with this sitting around and freezin', wet as a muskrat. He was going to start hoofing it for the T H ranch.

Fumbling in the darkness he packed Jake's pack sack and slung it on his shoulders. Thereupon, to his secret delight, the lawmen saddled their shivering horses and took the back trail in the darkness and the storm. Parting with him, they shook hands warmly.

"Tell that Gray family we're wishin' 'em luck," Tait said. "Mighty glad you can get that shark off their necks, Jake."

"Shape o' my neck?" Hank replied. "I don't savvy. Wal, so long fellers. Happy to have had company."

Approximately twenty-eight hours after Hank parted with McCoombs and his deputy, making it sunup on the following morning, Sheriff Guy Holman of Scalp Lock was getting breakfast in his bachelor quarters when Clayton Seymour burst in on him.

Seymour, a big, fleshy man, was perspiring. His small, mean mouth was twisted out of shape and his pale blue eyes showed panic.

"Guy, I've been robbed!" he yelled. "Robbed!"

Holman, who was wrinkled and old and bald, with a drooping gray mustache, looked at the money lender with undisguised dislike and contempt.

"That's good," he said. "Uh? I mean get hold of yourself. How'd it happen?"

"I don't know. I keep my window shutters locked on the inside when I leave my cottage, and I doublelock the door. I was out last night till after twelve, playing cards with some of the boys. Never noticed anything wrong when I got home, but first thing when I got out of bed this morning I saw my desk had been monkeyed with.

"A lot of my papers are missing, Sheriff. Valuable papers. Then—then I opened my safe. It had been looted. All my money stolen. Stolen! Do something quick, Guy. Nail the dirty thief!"

The lawman swore feelingly. "Why don't you keep your money in the bank? You lose it and ask me to— So the thief took valuable papers, too? Got anybody you suspect?"

Seymour's fleshy face, which ordinarily carried a stage smile, took on a look of hatred. "I suspect Chuck Miles of course."

Holman frowned. "Why Chuck, I'd like to know?"

"Blast it, that cowboy's done everything he knows how to stop me from taking over the T H ranch. He couldn't raise cash to pay off the Grays' loan, but he's cussed me to my face and threatened to kill me."

"Nothing unusual in that," said Holman drily. "A lot of men have said the same thing."

Seymour brushed that aside. As his rage mounted he was recovering from his panic. "I said I suspect Chuck Miles. Wild young heller, crazy in love with Betty Gray. And at noon sharp today the grace period I've given them Grays to pay off their note expires."

"I know!" Holman nodded grimly. "Are you going out to the T H? Or are they coming to town?"

"I'm going out there, and now, by jeepers, you'll go with me! If Mrs. Gray's got the cash to pay me— See what I mean?"

"No!" The sheriff swallowed a cup of coffee, but he had lost his appetite.

Seymour explained. "If the woman's got the *dinero*, it'll be a cinch she got it from Chuck Miles. The fool will have laid himself wide open. I'll swear out a warrant for him, and we'll start for the T H right now."

CHAPTER III

Bad Luck

ABOUT this same hour, a knotty, middle-aged man with flashing black eyes in a lean, dark face, clumped in hob-nailed boots up the trail to the T H ranch. He wore soiled corduroy pants, a blue flannel shirt and a black slouch hat. On his sturdy shoulders he carried a pack sack.

The ranch lay in a green valley cut by a rippling mountain stream and bordered on the north by a pine and aspen studded hill. At the upper, or east end, close to where the hills closed in, stood

a neat log house, a stable and a set of corrals.

But except for a saddled horse in the yard there was no stock in sight—not even chickens or a pig or a dog. Smoke lifted from the stovepipe of the house, and as Hank Barrows drew nearer, a girl came rushing out to greet him.

The outlaw stopped and had his look at Betty Gray. A tall and sturdy girl with light brown hair and soft rosy complexion, she impressed him as her letter had already impressed him—warm-hearted, impulsive and bubbling with life.

"Chuck—Mother—Larry!" she called over her shoulder. "He's here! He's here! I could kiss you, Pay Dirt Jake Ritter!"

He stepped back in amazed alarm, yet she flung her lithe young self upon him and kissed him. In that moment Hank knew that the game he had played and the risks he had taken to win this welcome were worth the gamble.

Now the others were running from the house: Chuck, a wiry, sandy-haired young man with a snub nose; Larry, a gangling kid all arms and legs and one wide freckled grin; Mrs. Gray, plump and calm as suited her white hair, adding a dignified note to the younger folks' noisy and joyful welcome.

The girl appraised Hank and said all in one breath, "We didn't know how you'd look, but anybody can see you're swell. Just swell. Where's your horse or burro? That pack on your back? Did you walk? Walk all the way from Goldflume. Did you get my letter?"

"I sure did, Betty." Hank was shaking hands with the others. "How are you, Mrs. Gray? The pleasure of meetin' up with you is all mine. Larry, b'gollies, I'm glad to see you! And you're Chuck, what the young lady let me know was her sweetheart. I was worried a mite, but now I've met you, Chuck, I reckon you'll do."

"You bet he'll do!" Betty put her arm around the young man's shoulders. "Pay Dirt, Daddy always said you were tiptop! Well, now we know you are."

The boy Larry gazed at him, dumb with hero worship, and Chuck grinned self-consciously.

"This is a mighty important day for the Grays," Chuck said. "I got here early so's to be with 'em. With Betty."

"We were getting scared you weren't going to make it, Jake," said Betty.

"I was a mite scairt myself," Hank returned enigmatically.

"But come in, come in!" said Mrs. Gray. "Take off that pack and have breakfast with us. Chuck caught a big mess of trout and brought them over from the Fiddle and Bow Ranch where he works."

Hank Barrows fidgeted. "I'm powerful sorry, ma'am," he began. Betty cut in urging him to stay and saying he'd be an old meanie if he didn't. Nonetheless he went on. "I just got to hump myself immejit on east of here to Dawson Junction on the railroad," he said.

"Why?" the three younger folks clamored.

He grinned at them, eyes bright and sharp as a magpie's. "Kids, can't a feller have no secrets? Could be a certain lady's waitin' eager to see me. Anyhow, I got to ramble along."

He reached into a pocket of his corduroys and hauled out a small, flat package wrapped in smoked buckskin, a piece of which had been in Jake Ritter's pack.

"Here you be, Mrs. Gray. Open 'er up, if you like, but there's an even ten thousand dollars in greenbacks. I generally prefers dust of nuggets or gold coin, but that paper money is heaps easier to carry."

The eyes of all were on the package which Mrs. Gray held in trembling hands. Two tears coursed down her cheeks and she tried to speak and could not. Betty, too, had choked up all at once. Hank cleared his throat.

"Wal, that represents just one-half of the stake which was made on Dad Gray's grubstake," he went on. "Now—now—'By everybody. Been plumb nice meetin' you!"

He started walking east into the hills. Larry gulped, "Gosh, Pay Dirt, you will come back, won't you?" And Chuck shouted. "Yes, come back soon. Do!"

From the corner of his eye he saw Betty and her mother clinging happy-faced to one another, waving to him and smiling through their tears. . . .

Hank Barrows walked up along the stream for a short distance to the spot

where he had left Coally, and he had just stepped out in the open area where the black was picketed when a harsh voice snapped an order from behind him on his right hand.

"Steady, Barrows!" the voice warned. "Don't reach for your gun."

The outlaw froze in his tracks. That voice he had heard before. Sheriff John McCoombs had just called him "Barrows" and the way he had emphasized the name indicated that he was going to be pretty hard to reason with.

Calmly and with very little change of expression, however, Hank answered.

"Hello, lawman," he said. "Ain't you makin' a mistake?"

McCoombs moved in behind the outlaw and took his gun. Then he circled until he faced Hank.

"I'll admit you pulled a cute one and a good one on me and Tait," he said, holding his Colt aimed at Hank's belt buckle. "But shootin' that prospector in cold blood was plumb revoltin'."

"Then you and me agree on one thing," said Hank.

"It was just by chance I got onto you," McCoombs went on. "Tait and I holed up beside an overhanging cliff to wait out the storm. Daylight came and I suddenly thought I should go to Scalp Lock to warn Sheriff Holman that you were in his territory.

"So I sent Bob home and rode back down the ridge. Magpies and crows were interested in something down in the canyon at my right. You know what I found, Barrows, you devil. I suppose you must have heard in Goldflume about Pay Dirt Jake selling his mine and that he'd have a wad of cash?"

Hank shook his head. "You're all wrong, McCoombs. If only you'd have let me alone a little bit longer I'd have fixed Jake's killer."

"Oh, yeah? Still all the reports I've had on you agree that you're an unpredictable sort of cuss. Often doing things nobody'd expect a bandit to do, sometimes making fools of lawmen, and doing strangely chivalrous things at other times.

"You'd showed me the letter from Betty to Ritter. So I figured you might take a notion to hand the Grays the money to pay off Seymour, and by grab, I saw you do it! I can't savvy the queer contradictions of your nature. Can you, Barrows?"

Hank shrugged. "McCoombs, I wish you'd let me finish my job for Betty and her folks."

"Ain't it finished?" rapped the sheriff. "I sort of suppose you figured the Grays need never know Pay Dirt Jake was dead?"

"That's right. I didn't want to sadden 'em. Reckoned they didn't need to know the truth. But I've still got important business with Clayton Seymour."

"With Seymour? The loan shark mentioned in the letter?"

The bandit nodded emphatically. "That cuss is comin' here today. I allowed to meet him, private like, after Mrs. Gray pays him."

"Ye-es? To rob him, Hank?"

"That's the least part of it." The outlaw's eyes glinted fiercely. "I'd goad him into a fight, force him to pull his shootin'-iron and kill him."

Sheriff McCoombs whistled sharply. "A good thing I nailed you before you murdered another man, much as Seymour may need killing! Why do you want to do the job?"

"He bushwhacked Pay Dirt Jake."

Hank's eyes met those of the peace officer steadily. There was a tight little silence.

"Can you prove it?" McCoombs asked finally.

"I can, if you'll give me the chance, McCoombs. Of course, my first plan is out now. But when Seymour comes to this T H ranch, I want to show myself to him. By a lucky accident I look like Pay Dirt Jake. I'm wearing Jake's clothes and I carry his pack sack. Savvy the burro, lawhawk?"

McCoombs eyed the bandit in an odd

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manner. His shrewd face twisted with thought.

"All right. You win, Barrows. But I'll be holding my gun on you. How'll we work the game?"

Hank mentioned his new plan and the lawman was leading both Coally and his own mount as the two men circled back to the aspen-and-pine-studded hillside north of the T H ranch buildings.

At the crest of this hill, McCoombs tied both horses. Then, keeping about six feet behind the bandit, he followed Hank down the slope to a spot as near the buildings as they dared to approach without danger of exposing themselves.

Much sooner than Hank had anticipated, two riders dashed up the valley from the west and thudded to a stop in the front yard. The outlaw recognized both men, for he had seen them in Scalp Lock last night though they had not seen him. They were Sheriff Guy Holman and Clayton Seymour. Betty Gray rushed out of the house.

"This is the first time we've been glad to see you, Mr. Seymour, because today we can pay you off!" Hank heard her say.

"You mean to say you folks have the cash to take up your note?" Seymour asked.

The sheriff, Hank noted, shifted uncomfortably, and he wore the expression of a man who heartily wished he was elsewhere.

Mrs. Gray came out, backed by Chuck and Larry, Larry making faces at Seymour while his mother waved a sheaf of greenbacks toward Seymour.

"Take this money and count it, please," she said simply.

Seymour took the bills. He looked hard at Chuck and at Chuck's horse, after which his eyes met the sheriff's and he nodded in a maliciously satisfied manner.

"Holman I can take oath these greenbacks were stolen from me. Now I demand that you arrest Chuck Miles and search him. He robbed me!"

In the aspens, Hank turned his head and spoke low to McCoombs.

"Good thing we're here. I hadn't figured on that happenin'. Had plumb overlooked it."

CHAPTER IV

Good Deeds for More Good Deeds

IF LIGHTNING had struck within ten feet of the group in the yard they could not have been more completely astonished or thoroughly stunned. Chuck was the first to recover. He leaped forward, face flaming and fists clenched.

"Pile off till I cram that down your throat, Seymour!"

"Keep him away, Sheriff!" Seymour cried.

"Stand back, Chuck," Holman ordered. "Seymour claims he was robbed last night. Where did you folks get this money?"

Before anyone could answer this question, a rawboned ranchman on a lathering horse loped into the yard. "Mornin', everybody?" the ranchman shouted. "Seymour, I heard in town you might be out here and I'm darned glad to find you."

Sheriff McCoombs spoke in a whisper to Hank. "Why anybody'd be glad to see that old skunk is more than I savvy."

The outlaw grinned. "This part is goin' to be kind of good," he remarked.

"Get along out of here, Ken Williams," Seymour snapped. "You're interrupting—"

"Sheriff Holman, folks," the ranchman broke in, fishing a paper from his pocket, "Clayton Seymour ain't such a flint-hearted old scoundrel after all. Look! This is a note I'd given him for eighteen hundred dollars. He's marked it 'paid.'"

Seymour's eyes were wide open, his mouth puckered as if he was biting into something very sour, and for once he seemed to have been struck dumb. The Gray family, Sheriff Holman and Chuck, too, were silent.

"I was in town right early," Rancher Ken Williams rushed on. "I stepped around to the post office to get my mail and found old Gib just opening up. Then, by jingo, when Gib collected the letters which had been dropped through the mail slot last night, he handed me this one.

"Golly! When I showed him what was in it—my canceled note from Seymour, Gib noticed that there were eight more envelopes addressed to men who owed Seymour money. It wasn't exactly right maybe, but the two of us held them envelopes to the light, and sure enough, canceled notes was in every one of 'em.

"Seymour, I don't know what got into you, but I say this is the whitest and finest thing you ever done in all your life. All us fellers'll have a chance now to make good after gettin' you and your killin' interest rates off our necks. I congratulate you!" Williams held out his hand.

SEYMOUR, however, made no motion to take that hand. He had the appearance of a man taken suddenly and violently ill.

In the aspens Sheriff McCoombs voiced a chuckle so loud it might easily have betrayed the two watchers had attention not been centered elsewhere at the moment.

"Seems you did a good night's work, Hank Barrows," he said in low tones. "What'd you do with Seymour's cash? Got it on you?"

"Nope, said Hank. "I made a package of it and mailed the package with a note to Sheriff Holman. Apparently he ain't got it yet."

In the yard, Ken Williams had cried:

"Well, for a man who's done something big and fine Clayton Seymour sure acts funny. Whats ails you, Clayton?"

Seymour rallied and straightened up in his saddle. "I get it at last!" he shouted. "That—that double-darned Chuck Miles not only robbed me, but he sent out them letters and—"

"I did not!" yelled Chuck. "But everybody will believe Seymour sent them out himself. He'll have a devil of a job proving he didn't. He'll not get back his notes! Let's see if we can straighten out this queer business. Williams, just before you came Holman told us Seymour claimed he had been robbed, and Holman asked where the Gray family got the cash to pay Seymour."

"As for that," Betty and young Larry put in, their voices rising together, "a long time ago our daddy grubstaked Pay Dirt Jake Ritter. Pay Dirt made a big stake and he just came and gave us half of it—ten thousand dollars."

Hank saw Seymour's jaw sag for a moment.

But again he recovered.

"Rubbish!" he snapped. "Chuck made up that story and they was all of 'em to tell it, Sheriff. He had to make up some—"

"If you don't believe it, take a look at Jake's hob-nailed foot prints," Chuck interposed curtly. "They're still fresh."

Sheriff Holman gazed down at the ground.

"Look, Seymour! Here they are."

"It's a trick!" howled Seymour, as he too looked hard at the footprints so plain in the damp sandy soil. "A trick. Chuck got hold of a pair of miner's boots for to put this over. We won't be hoodwinked."

However, from the twitching of his face muscles and the sharp, frightened glances he threw to right and left, Hank Barrows knew Seymour was rattled and badly frightened.

"A trick?" muttered the puzzled sheriff. "Could be that Chuck done that."

The effervescent Betty came to life with a bound that carried her to Holman's stirrup. "Oh, no, it isn't a trick. Jake—and he's awfully nice—was as real as you are!"

"Hold it, girl. What'd he look like? I mean, describe him."

On the hillside, Hank Barrows spoke to McCoombs.

"That's my cue," he said. "I got to be steppin' in. Better give me my gun."

McCoombs tugged at his left ear. "Me give you back your Colt and let you shoot your way out of this tight? Nothin' doing. I'm willing for you to step out there, but do it empty-handed."

Betty Gray was giving the group in the yard a clear word picture of Hank Barrows dressed in miner's boots, corduroys, blue flannel shirt, slouch hat and carrying a brown canvas pack on his shoulders. At last she came to a pause.

"It's all a lie!" Seymour shouted. "There ain't no such man. You never saw such a man."

"Look at me, Seymour!" The man Betty had described rounded the southeast corner of the house and stopped, facing the money lender.

Seymour almost fell off his horse. Blood drained from his face.

"Ritter!" he gulped. "Jake Ritter! But he was dead. *Dead!*"

"And you're the man who killed me," Hank said in a hollow tone, pointing an accusing finger at Seymour. "Seymour, you laid for me and drygulched me and dumped my body in a canyon where I'd not be found."

"Yes!" screamed the baited man. "I mean no. NO! NO! Folks, I never saw that man. I never—I never! Don't nobody try to stop me!"

With amazing speed he reached for his gun and started to wheel his horse. But with speed equally amazing, Hank Barrows covered the distance between himself and Seymour, and leaped and caught the man around the waist before his Colt had cleared leather.

A frightened, snorting horse wheeled aside and two men, locked together, hit the earth. Hank Barrows, now as savage and merciless as a wolf, hoped for a good fight. But to his chagrin, Seymour went limp all over, and Hank saw the pallor of death on his face.

Shock, not the outlaw, had killed the loan shark.

Hank bounced to his feet and noticed that Holman and all the others were still dazed. "If you ain't caught on yet, girl," it was Betty to whom he spoke, "I'm mighty sorry to have to tell you that good old Pay Dirt Jake was murdered by this coyote Seymour. I figured somehow to get him and I've done it."

He gave the Sheriff of Scalp Lock his attention. "Holman, the other half of Jake's money—Mrs. Gray now has one half of it—I mailed to you, along with some more of Seymour's dinero. See that whoever has a right to Jake's money gets it. Betty, Chuck, Larry, Mrs. Gray, it's been a great pleasure meeting you. But now it's, so long, folks."

Sheriff John McCoombs stepped around the corner of the house and clipped:

"Hold it, Hank Barrows."

Hank grinned at the peace officer. "Thanks for lettin' me play out this hand, old scout. Maybe our trails'll cross again. Maybe we'll even camp together again someday. But now I'm sayin' so long to you too."

In the same moment, impulsive Betty Gray placed herself between McCoombs and the outlaw, effectively preventing the sheriff from getting an open shot at Hank as he raced around the corner of the house.

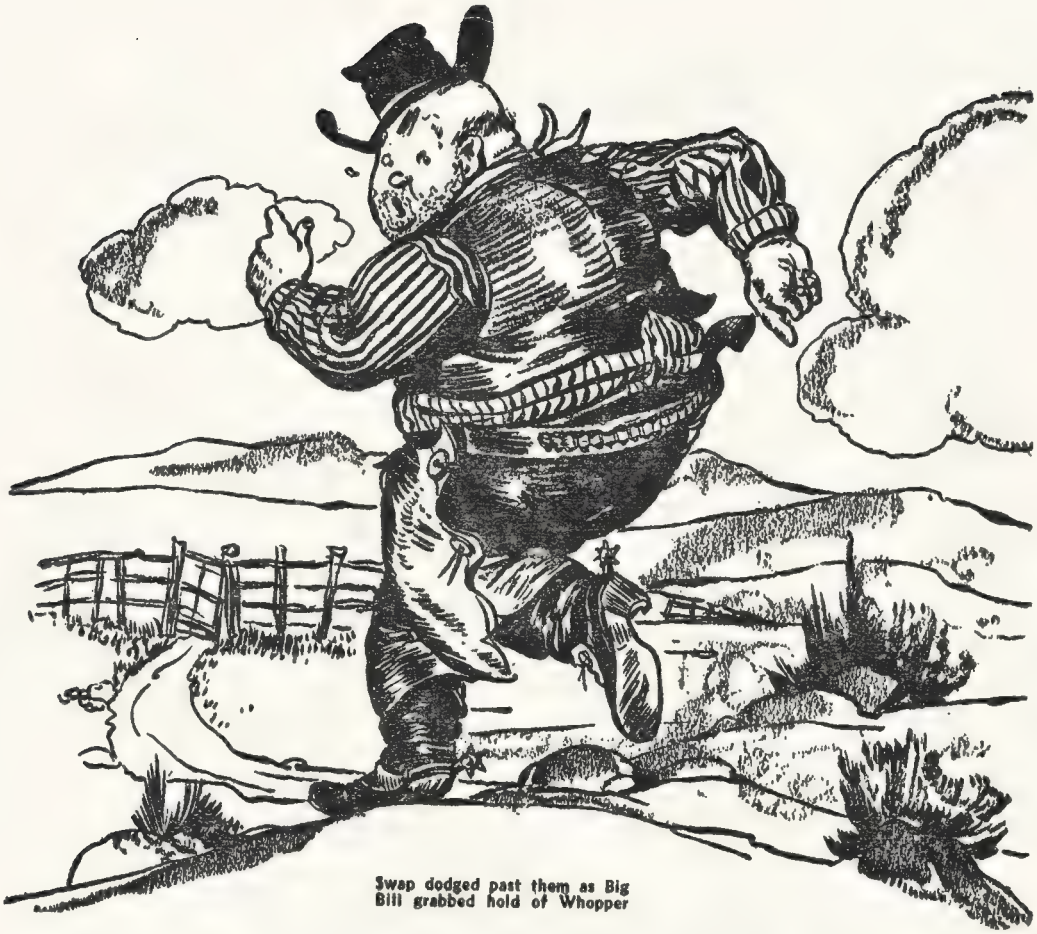
McCoombs pivoted and scooted around the opposite corner of the dwelling to its north side. Hank, fleeing across the open area between house and aspens, had the lawman in the corner of his eye and he saw John McCoombs stumble and fall—although his feet had met with no visible obstruction.

Hank chuckled silently and sped on up the wooded slope to where Coally was tied. As he stepped up into his saddle, he heard McCoombs' six shooter bang out five shots and then he heard Holman's voice ask,

"Any chance that you hit him, John?"

"Heck, no! And I'm too wore out to trail him, Guy."

"Humn? Come to think of it, so'm I, John."



Swap dodged past them as Big Bill grabbed hold of Whopper

THE 3R BRAND

By SYL MacDOWELL

When Swap's mistaken for a school teacher at Brushy Bald, the wandering waddies are fed up on reading, writing and arithmetic — and sure get education in trouble dodgin'!

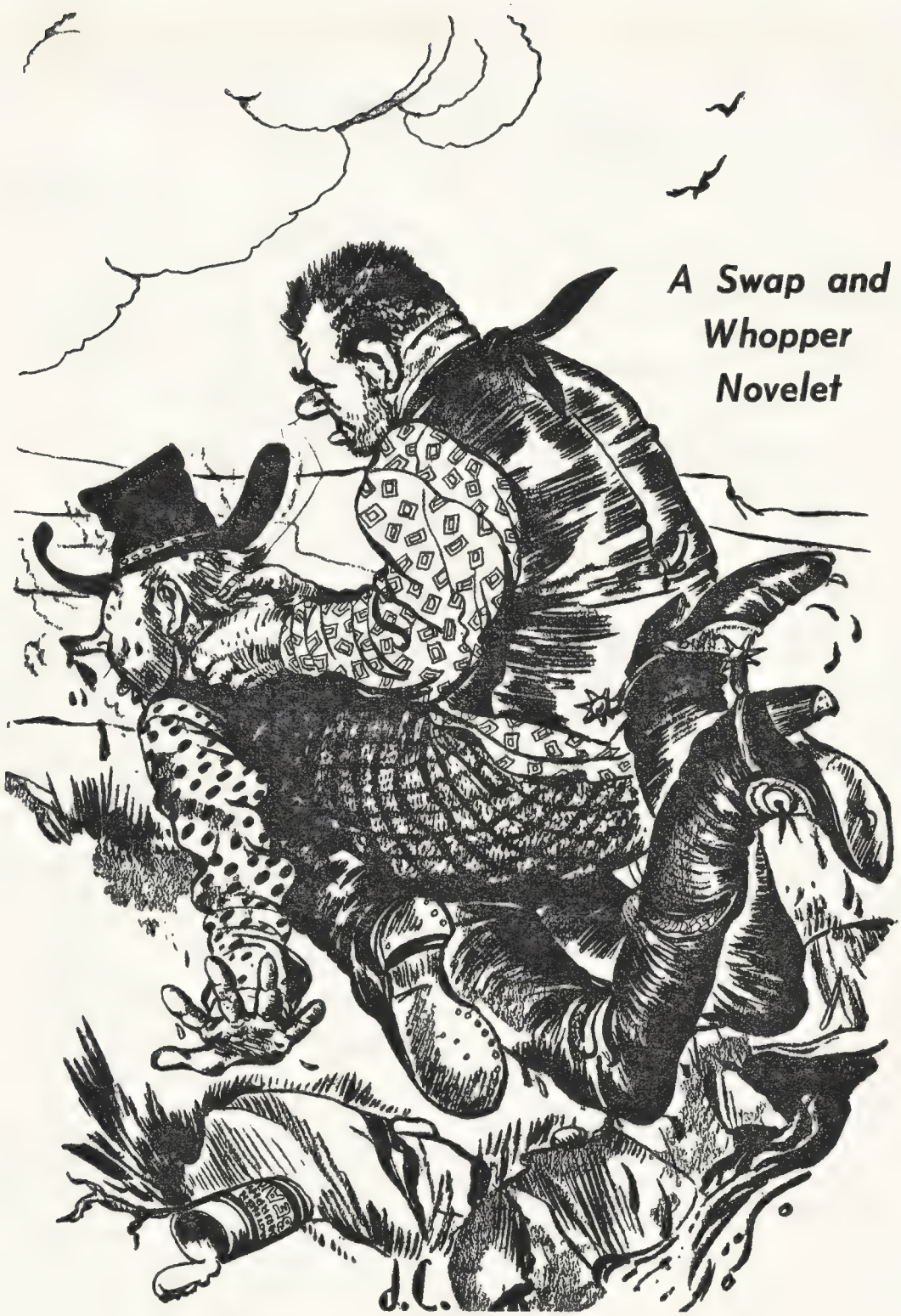
CHAPTER I

Saddle Squatters

THOUGHTFULLY, as he considered a recent mistake and resolved to avoid repeating it in the future, "Whopper" Whaley sat sidewise in his saddle, fished a slab of plugcut out of a hip pocket and with the point of a knife blade began picking birdshot out of it.

"It'd never have happened if I'd remained in a settin' position," he remarked to his companion, "Swap" Bootle.

"It'd never happened if yuh'd paid attention tuh that sign which said, 'Any-



A Swap and Whopper Novelet

D.C.

body found here after dark will be found around here from then on,' " Swap reminded him.

"How'd I know it was a chicken ranch we camped on? And that the hen spread owner was trigger-touchy, now eggs are sellin' for eighty cents per dozen?"

"Well, it might have been worse," said Swap, who always tried to see the bright side of things. "Fer instance, he might have let me have the other barrel."

Whopper shifted his bony weight tenderly to the other side of the saddle. He was a lazy, long-legged kak kangaroo astride an offshade dun that he called a cheese-colored roan. He pared off a

SWAP

chew and lifted it to his snaggle-toothed mouth.

"The fact remains," he told Swap, "I should set down more and sort of save my strength."

"What for?"

"Emergencies. Yessir, if I'm ever tempted to go to work, it'll be a settin' down job."

That was an unlikely possibility. Both Whopper and his chubby little stirrup squirrel pardner had avoided labor of any sort for a long time, since they had quit cowpunching to roam the wide West. They had made a career of loafing and had done well at it, though they *had* missed a few meals.

Whopper was hungry now, as usual, and the nubbin of plugcut which sharpened his wits also sharpened his appetite. Since early morning and a campfire breakfast that consumed the last of their saddle chuck, they had glutted themselves on nothing more filling than scenery.

It was around noon now and mellow Indian summer. They were jogging southward through pleasant country, down a wide, prairie-like valley that separated the wild and tumbled mass of the Trinity Alps from northern California's Siskiyou Range.

Early frosts had painted vivid scarlet masses where vine maple grew against the evergreen slopes. Distant Mount Shasta wore a gleaming white crown of October snow against the cool, blue sky. Bands of fat cattle grazed along the yellowing willows bordering a winding creek.

From a swampy backwater a flock of mallards rose, circled the riders once, decided that they were harmless then splashed noisily back into their shallow feeding pond again.

The dim trail they followed crossed a gravelly shallow in the creek and as the pardners slacked rein, to let their horses lower their heads and drink, a trail sign on the opposite bank reared up and confronted them.

ALL might have gone well with Swap and Whopper if they had not seen that sign. They would have moseyed on, uneventfully, finally reaching a balmier clime along the lower Sacramento to remain for the winter. The fateful sign said:

BRUSHY BALD, 2 MILES

"What yuh reckon 'Brushy Bald' is, a town or a hair tonic?" speculated Swap as he squinted at the sign.

"Never heerd of it. But it won't take long tuh find out."

So they splashed across and the trail led them toward a long ridge, scarred by an old burn.

Rounding the foot of the ridge, they sighted a road, a clump of tall locusts, a windmill and fenced, plowed fields. Nearing that evidence of human habitation, they saw a small building with a faded sign on its tall false front that said:

BRUSHY BALD STORE & POST OFFICE
Angus McWhortle, Prop.

On beyond were ranchhouses, pastures and a small schoolhouse.

"Ain't exackly a thrivin' metropolis," grunted Whopper.

"Things ain't changed much hearabouts since pioneer times, I reckon," said Swap. "Figger it's worth a looksee?"

Whopper ran a thumb inside his loose belt and grew acutely conscious of his gnawing hunger. A look of crafty cunning crept into his eyes. Swap saw it and added hastily:

"That store don't interest us none."

"Don't it?"

"Not even if it was Monkey-Sawbucks' main emporium."

"Why don't it?"

"Yuh fergot we're plumb busted?"

Whopper gave his levipants a determined hitch.

"Listen, Swap! How long d'yuh expect Mister McWhortle'd git along without that big front?"

"Big fronts need somethin' behind 'em."

The insinuation didn't faze Whopper. He ejected tobacco juice confidently, cocked his loppy hat at a jaunty angle.

"The less yuh got, the more yuh need a big, bold front," he stated. "Now try to look important and leave the talk to me."

With that Whopper kneed the cheese-colored roan ahead. Swap sighed despairingly and trailed after him. Whopper had the gift of gab, no doubt about that. Further, he was a slick liar. He lied so glibly that sometimes he got to believing himself.

But then, drifters who lived by their wits had to take chances. If they wanted to eat. So Swap hoped for the best as he feared the worst.

They dismounted at the hitchrack and Swap followed his shabby but swaggering pardner into the Brushy Bald Store and Post Office.

Behind the counter they saw a man weighing a package of something on a scales with his hand on top of it. As the door banged shut he shot a quick look at them. He had a small, sharp face hemmed in by sandy tassel-whiskers and a pair of small, round ears that clung tightly like clams to the side of his narrow head.

That face quick-froze Swap's budding hopes. It was the face of a man hard to deal with, especially on a credit basis.

"Howdy, friend," Whopper greeted loudly. "I'm expectin' a batch of mighty important mail."

His intention was to impress Angus McWhortle. But the effort had no apparent effect.

"Name?" barked the other, taking the package from the scales and marking up the price with a red crayon.

WHOPPER

"Perfessor Whaley."

Swap blinked. Professor of what, he wondered. The learned title didn't fit his nervy pardner. If ignorance were bliss, Whopper should be the happiest man alive. Angus McWhortle took short, brisk steps to a honeycomb of mail boxes up by the front window, poked a hand into one and fetched out a thick packet. He crackled in a quick, jerky voice:

"Here she be, Professor."

WHOPPER'S long jaw sagged. He never wrote letters and never received any.

"Sh-shore it ain't a mistake?" he stammered.

"Nope. And it's a C.O.D., for seventeen dollars and thutty-two cents."

That staggered Whopper. He swayed to a showcase and leaned limply against it.

"Wh-what's inside?" he blatted.

Angus McWhortle banged the packet against the edge of the counter sharply.

"Books, I'd say."

"Books? Wh-what kind o' books?" Not that Whopper cared. He was only trying to talk himself out of the mess he had talked himself into.

McWhortle tore off a corner of the wrapper and peered.

"One thick book, two thin books, Professor Bailey."

"Hold on, friend, the name ain't Bailey, it's—"

Just then the door burst open and the pardners were aware of the gusty presence of a red-faced man as big as a barn. He also smelled like a barn. He was barely in time to hear McWhortle address Whopper as "Professor." He made a rush. Whopper shied and tried to dodge but was cornered against the showcase.

The newcomer walloped him on the back so hard that Whopper gulped and swallowed his chew.

"Gol-blamed glad you decided to come, Professor Bailey!" he exploded enthusiastically. "About gave you up, that's what!"

As he uttered this hearty welcome, the barn-sized party extended a long arm across the counter, past McWhortle and to the post office bulletin board beside the mail boxes. On the bulletin board were the usual notices seen in country post offices—photo posters of wanted fugitives, notices of land sales and grazing leases, and other oddments of public interest.

One of these notices he jerked down, half crumpled it and and dropped it on the counter. Then he clamped hold of Whopper by a skinny arm and steered him out of the store.

Choking from the plugcut stuck in his throat, Whopper gibbered breathless, wordless protests. The big man whacked him on the back again, so hard that Whopper's hat flew off.

Swap gave a frantic look at the ripped notice on the counter and his eyes widened as he read it through:

UNFILLED VACANCY

Easy sitting-down job, close to warm self-stoking stove, free room & board, five-day week, 8 months annual vacation on pay. See Big Bill Barnes, Brushy Bald.

Whopper's opportunity to face the future on the squat had miraculously arrived. Swap snatched up the notice and skittered after his pardner and his beaming captor.

CHAPTER II

A Job at Last

THE hearty party who was evidently the barn-sized Bill Barnes was boosting pale, protesting Whopper into the cab of a battered red pickup truck. Swap grabbed Big Bill's sleeve. He turned with a puzzled scowl, one broad foot on the running board.

"Who in blazes are you, young feller?" growled Big Bill.

Whopper supplied the answer.

"He—he's my helper!" he warbled. "And right now I shore need help!"

Big Bill lowered his foot from the running board and sized Swap up without warmth.

"Seems like you're importanter than I thought you was, Professor," he rumbled thoughtfully, "what with bringin' side help along with you."

"He goes along wherever I go!" Whopper yammered wildly, trying to climb down out of the cab seat.

"Sure, sure if you say so, Professor," Big Bill Barnes grunted grudgingly, shoving Whopper back with a broad hand. He was still unsure of Swap's status. "Didn't count on two of you, but okay if you say so. Git in, Insignificant."

Swap spryly eluded the other man's sweeping embrace.

"Where we headin'?" he asked anxiously.

"Mile or so."

"Then I'll foller along with the hosses."

Jerking a nod, Big Bill crammed himself behind the steering wheel and started.

Leading the cheese-colored roan, Swap loped the bay-sorrel in the dusty wake of the truck. It turned in at an open gate and down a bumpy lane to an unpainted ranchhouse that had a toehold on a bleak, rocky slope overlooking slab-sided outbuildings, corrals and cattle-dotted pastureland.

"Here's where you put up," announced Big Bill. "From now on."

Whopper stayed glued to the pickup seat until Big Bill added:

"We're just in time for dinner. C'mon in and meet Missus B."

Whopper sniffed, smelled beef stew and hopped to the ground. At the promise of food, his alarm at this mysterious seizure abated a little.

"We'll unsaddle and be right in," he told their host.

At a corral gate, Swap and Whopper held hurried confab.

"Me, I'm for tootlin' away from here right now!" Swap whispered hoarsely. "C'mon!"

"Before we eat? That'd be awful imperlite!"

"Take a look at this!" cried Swap, producing the crumpled notice.

Whopper read, lips moving with the effort.

Swap shuddered. "Looks like you got trapped into a job!"

Whopper fanged off a hunk of plug-cut and rubbed his stubbly jaw as he estimated the situation. Another whiff from the ranchhouse kitchen brought him to a decision.

"If I kin start in when that three months vacation on pay begins, it might be a good proposition," he said.

"It don't say what the job is," Swap objected. "Mebbe you ain't cut out for it."

"Only one way to find out. Wonder if there's dumplin's in that stew?"

Still agitated, Swap tagged his lean and hungry pardner to the house and into a warm kitchen full of inviting smells that rose from a set and waiting table. A woman, with back turned to them, was in the pantry cutting a big, thick pumpkin pie into three huge wedges. Big Bill Barnes sat at the head of the table, thrusting a red-checkered napkin around his neck.

"Ma," he boomed, pointing a fork at Whopper, "meet the new schoolteacher. Light, Prof, and grab at the vittles."

THE invitation to light was unnecessary. Whopper's long legs folded and he collapsed into a chair. Him, a schoolteacher!

"Migosh!" he croaked. "M-must be some m-mistake!"

"Professor Whaley ain't up on the three R's," protested Swap.

"Me neither," said Big Bill, dipping into the beef stew. "All I know is three are a crowd. Dig in, anyhow, Sprout."

Whopper recovered sufficiently from his shock to swing his legs under the table, reach for the bowl of stew and start ladling the big, meaty hunks out onto his plate.

So far as his education extended, the three R's stood for riding, roping and resting-up. He couldn't add to ten without taking his hands out of his pockets. He couldn't parse a parsnip. He thought syntax was the revenue stamp on a bottle of hooch and that a verb root was something you went to a dentist to get pulled out. As a fount of knowledge, Whopper was a slow drip.

Big Bill Barnes ate fast and devoted his exclusive attention to eating. But when he had finished, he shoved back and shook himself a porcupine quill toothpick out of a narrow-necked hot sauce bottle.

"As chairman of the Brushy Bald school board," he began, "I know it don't take a lot of brains to teach young brats. Not that I'm running down brains, Professor. Brains is useful things to have. They fertilize the roots of the hair and what not. This pertickler job takes more'n brains."

Whopper swallowed the last hunk of stew meat whole.

"Wh-what else, fer instance?" he inquired.

"Well, the youngsters around here, they're purty growed-up for their age. Pumpin' learning into the cranial cavities of young Brushy Balders comes under the head of dangerous callin's."

"Wh-what happened to the last schoolteacher?" piped Swap, palely pushing away his pie, uneaten.

"Yeah, tell us about it," wheezed Whopper, reaching for more pie.

"Well, he suffered a slight touch of rigor mortis," Big Bill Barnes admitted.

"Thing like that kin git to be chronic," Whopper mumbled through a mouthful of pie.

"But don't let it worry you none. Although I wish this here assistant penwiper you brung along was a few sizes bigger."

Whopper washed down the last of the pie with a swig of coffee. His hunger appeased, his thoughts turned from food to flight. He dimly realized that there were good reasons why the Brushy Bald schoolteaching job was an unfilled vacancy.

The occupational hazards were about the same as lion taming, raising rattlesnakes or pounding dynamite. The time had come for some fancy side-stepping. He lurched to his feet with the support of his chair back and eased his belt out a few notches.

"There's just one thing, B-Brother B-Barnes," he managed to say, "that don't attrack me tuh this here position."

Big Bill spit out his toothpick and clouded up.

"Look here, you ain't backin' out!" he declared firmly. "I been to a heap of trouble and some expense too, gittin' somebody to lam lessons into our comin' generation!"

"It—it's just that I'm too scrup'lus to take pay for that three months vacation," Whopper lied feebly.

"It's customary, Professor."

"When is it customary for the vacation to start?" Whopper inquired hopefully. "Along about now?"

"School opens now. Tomorrow."

Whopper swallowed hard. It was going to take all his talent of evasion to wiggle out of this.

The first difficulty was to separate himself from Big Bill's presence. He had a sudden bright idea. He snapped his fingers, as though remembering something.

"Migosh, I plum fergot to bring along them books f-from the p-post office!" he exclaimed, grabbing his hat and starting for the door.

For a big man, Barnes moved very fast. He reached the exit a jump ahead of Whopper, in time to blockade it.

"Save yourself, Professor," he said, planting a hand against Whopper's wishbone. "Let your helper fetch 'em."

"You bet!" chirped Swap, bee-lining for liberty. A sudden unhappy thought halted him. He had forgotten about that C.O.D., for $17.82.

"When does Whop—the Perfessor, I mean—start collectin' his pay?" he asked.

"Soon as the county taxes is collected. Why?"

IT WAS no time to divulge the barren state of their finances. Or was it? Big Bill settled the doubt for him.

"What with free room and board and a complimentary lot in the local cemetery throwed in, the Prof won't need money," he pointed out. "As for the teachin' end of the job, most Brushy Balders are first-graders, so books ain't needed."

Whopper refrained from mentioning that he hadn't got along as far as the first grade. He was thinking about something else. About the cheese-colored roan, the open road and how far he could get from Brushy Bald before the school term started tomorrow.

"B-Brother B-Barnes," he burbled, "I hanker for a looksee at the local temple of larning. W-where is it at?"

The other man rubbed his hands together pleasedly.

"Mighty glad you're takin' such a interest," he declared heartily.

Whopper fingered his moist brow and breathed again.

"Saddle up," he said, waggling a hand at Swap, who hesitated on the doorstep.

"It's in easy walkin' distance," stated Big Bill. "I'll go along."

Again he wrapped his powerful hand around Whopper's bony arm and steered him outdoors and across lots.

COMING SOON!

•

BUTTES AND SADDLES

Another Swap and Whopper Novelet

By SYL MacDOWELL

CHAPTER III

The Adverbial Claws

BRUSHY BALD district schoolhouse stood on a hump of ground between the Barnes ranch and Angus McWhortle's store, back quite a way from the road. It was a one-room affair on a bare, fenced-in acre. It was painted a hygienic white with a small bell cupola on top and a flagpole in front.

Barnes' attention was drawn to the base of the pole, where it was hacked halfway through.

"Got to git that fixed."

"H-how'd it happen?" Whopper asked.

"Pack of young cut-ups must have treed the last teacher and axed him down," ruminated Big Bill. "Like a danglin' participle. Let's look inside."

He herded Whopper in front of him. There was an array of empty seats, blackboards and, up in front on a raised platform, the teacher's desk. With ink splashes on the wall behind it, mutely eloquent of the playful ways of tender-aged but overgrown country pupils.

Whopper wobbled to the teacher's chair and sank into it.

He rose instantly with an anguished yowl, clapping a hand to the most-used part of his levipants. He saw, then, the sharp-pointed tacks.

Young Brushy Balders had arranged a preliminary welcome for the new teacher. He also observed that he had shed a few pellets of birdshot in his hurried return to the perpendicular.

"One thing," chuckled Big Bill, "you won't find this job dull. Hope you're fond of kids, Professor."

Whopper with a muffled groan reached for his plugcut and solaced himself with a bulging cheekful.

He could think of a lot of things including smallpox, that he was fonder of but didn't mention them.

"If a epidemic sprung up around here between now and tomorrow, it'd be a good time to start that vacation, wouldn't it?" he said.

"This is the healthiest doggone community in the State," was Big Bill's discouraging answer. "Only weakness amongst the juvenile element is between the ears. They don't know a vaccination mark from a quotation mark.

"Culture bounces offen their heads like bullets offen a rock. They think grammar is made up of proper nouns and cusswords, that a adverbial clause scratches like a bobcat, a preposition is a business deal, and metaphors are shooting stars. So don't worry none about that vacation-on-pay. You'll earn it, Professor."

Whopper's lean jaw was working fast. His thoughts clung to the epidemic idea. That seemed the most promising way out of this dilemma.

As he pondered, he saw the birdshot in the chair. Tenderly he rubbed the perforated afterparts of his levis where the stinging shotgun charge had overtaken him.

Then the inspiration came, like a blinding flash.

"Smallpox!" He almost yelled it.

Big Bill Barnes was startled.

"What's that?" he yelled back.

"I—I feel like I was bein' took down with smallpox!" babbled Whopper.

The other man looked at him searchingly.

"You don't seem put out about it," he observed. "Fact is, I'd say you seem plum jubilated. Showin' any symptoms?"

"Showin' 'em—no," Whopper stated modestly. "That is, not to nobody but a doctor. But yuh wouldn't want to take chances anyhow, would yuh, B-Brother B-Barnes? On a schoolteacher who *might* have a touch of smallpox?"

"Seems like you got took awful sudden," Big Bill reflected sourly.

Swap was jolted for a moment by what Whopper had said. But he was onto him now.

The motive for this bald lie stood out as plain as a harness-shed in a fog. The motive was to get away from Brushy Bald before school opened, and to remove any objections on the part of the public-spirited Bill Barnes to his immediate departure.

BUT Big Bill was a man not easily balked. In these days of scarcity,

including schoolteachers, he clung to what he had. Once again he clamped his iron grip on Whopper's arm.

"What you've got, Professor," he stated with cheerful confidence, "is a simple case of indigestion. With a few hives throwed in, maybe, from overeating. And I know what to do for that."

"Wh-what?"

"I'll just trot you yonder to Angus McWhortle's. He's got a big stock of home remedies. We'll dose yuh up good and heavy."

All at once Whopper really did look sick. Of all places, the Brushy Bald store and post office was the very last where he wanted to go. He tried to sag into the chair again, regardless of the tacks.

But Big Bill hoisted him erect and steered him outside.

"All you need is a big slug of cow salts," Barnes assured him. "You'll be fit as a fiddle by tomorrow. Grab his other arm there, substitute."

Swap grabbed. They marched the wilted Whopper past the chopped flagpole, out of the schoolyard and across fields in the direction of the McWhortle store. Big Bill oozed optimism as they went.

"Whatever ails you, Professor, we'll head it off," he said. "Till vacationtime, anyhow. Then you can have all the blamed diseases and disorders you want."

When they reached the store, pushing Whopper inside, McWhortle was marking merchandise up another notch. He allowed himself to be interrupted while Big Bill explained their errand.

The storekeeper ran an eye over the lean, draggly pardner.

"He's foundered and has got heaves, not hives," he declared. "I've got just the thing for that."

He reached a tall, round bottle down from a shelf, sleeved the dust off it and squinted at the directions on the label.

"It says, 'one small dipperful every two hours until symptoms disappear.'"

"Migosh, a dipperful!" wailed Whopper. "Wh-what is it?"

"Castor oil," said McWhortle, grasping the cap and unscrewing it. "Good ole standby for man or beast. You'll feel better in no time."

"I—I feel better already!" Whopper blurted. "Yessir, I feel so good I reckon I don't need no medicine! Just f-fresh air!"

He stampeded toward the door.

"Hey, you forgot something!" McWhortle sang out, reaching for the C.O.D. package.

"How could he fergit something, not knowin' anything?" cried Swap.

It was time for the plain truth. It was time to tell Big Bill Barnes, with a witness present, that Whopper wasn't a professor. That he wasn't a schoolteacher. That he wasn't anything much. That the two of them were innocent victims of a simple mistake. That they—

The door was flung open just as Whopper reached it. He clashed head-on with a baldish, spectacled man wearing a wing collar, string tie and frock coat and carrying a traveling bag.

The force of their collision sent the bag out of the newcomer's hand. It banged against the door and flew open, spilling out its contents—a pint of whisky, a pair of socks and a thin, worn book.

Hurled backward by the unexpected impact, the man in the frock coat rocked on his heels, then toppled and sat in a bin of apples. His wing collar had flown open and his spectacles had slid to the tip of his nose. Otherwise undisturbed, he gazed owlishly at those present over the top of them.

Big Bill Barnes barged forward, picked up the scattered articles and returned them to the bag. All but the book. That he held at arm's length and scrutinized it. It was a much-used McGuffey's first reader. A change stole over him.

"Who are you, stranger?" he inquired in a voice that sizzled like a lighted fuse.

WIGGLING more comfortably into the apple bin, the other man swung his legs, selected a rosy-cheeked Newton Pippin, polished it on his thigh, took a popping bite and mumbled:

"If A had seven apples to divide evenly with B and C, watsa—hic—answer?"

"Applesauce," snorted McWhortle.

Big Bill fluttered the pages of the first

reader in his thick fingers until he was scowling at a name penned on the fly leaf.

"It says here," he suddenly exploded, " 'Professor Ichabod Bailey!' "

The arrival nested deeper in the apples, rested an elbow on the edge of the bin and took another juicy bite.

"Backward oh backward—hic—turn in thy flight," he recited with a merry wink, "make me a—hic—boy again jessferanight."

Angus McWhortle allowed himself a quick look at the name on the C.O.D. package.

"Welcome to Brushy Bald and do you happen to have seventeen dollars and thirty-two cents in even change?" he briskly asked the man in the apple bin.

Whopper's desire for fresh air became an overwhelming urge. He legged it for the door again. Big Bill Barnes tore after him.

"Hold on, you split infinitive!" he roared.

CHAPTER IV

Simple As ABC

GETTING out of places in a hurry was a specialty of Whopper's. He was built for it. But Big Bill Barnes was not. Also, in his grim singleness of purpose or single-purposeness, whichever it was, he entirely overlooked the open traveling bag on the floor in front of him. One broad foot smashed into it. The lid closed around his shin. He stumbled and hit the edge of the half-open door nose first.

Now that a quick exodus was so timely, Swap didn't intend to be left behind. He leaped like a bobcat making for the roof of a henhouse, and hit Big Bill's broad back running. He crossed the obstruction that bridged his way to freedom and cleared the store porch at a jump.

He wished that he had left the cheese-colored roan and the bay-sorrel at the hitchrail, as he scooted under it and pattered after Whopper, who was dashing back to the Barnes place and the corral that held their horses.

Big Bill hobbled out, like a bear dragging a trap.

"Stop or I'll rub your head in the dirt, like grating a nutmeg!" he bawled.

That inducement only upped Whopper's getaway to jackrabbit speed. Big Bill swore and kicked, the satchel flew off of his foot and soared onto the roof of the store porch. At a lumbering lope he started. He got up steam as he went.

His massive legs lashed like the pistons of a freight locomotive. In about the second quarter-section he closed in on Swap. The little pardner felt the pursuer's breath on the back of his neck. One more jump and Big Bill would be on him. He clamped his hat on tight, mindful of the nutmeg threat.

Then Barnes, blowing like a whale, barged past him. He wasn't after small fry. Now Swap tail-ended in this strange race. He could have tootled for the hills, up across the bald, brushy burn and into the primitive wilderness of the Trinity Alps.

But liberty wasn't worth much without his horse. To put his freedom on a permanent basis, he had to reach the Barnes corral and clamp onto his bay-sorrel. So he kept going.

Whopper, naturally, had the same idea. He reached the lane that turned into the Barnes homeplace and turned. There was a culvert that spanned a muddy irrigation ditch. The planking was wet and slick. Whopper's stirrup-smooth bootsoles slipped. He pinwheeled and took a wild header into the ditch. He was crawling out, pawing slime and ooze from his face when Big Bill landed on him.

Swap dodged past them as Big Bill sat on Whopper with the solid satisfaction of a hog on a yamhill. Being a man of his word, Barnes set about doing exactly what he had promised.

Whopper uttered muffled yowls. It was fortunate that his scraggly skull was coated generously with mud. It would take Barnes some time to grate a greased nutmeg.

Swap finished the last lap into the ranch premises and gabbled hoarse self-congratulations as he saw the horses dozing by a feed-rack in the corral. Their saddles and few forlorn posses-

sions were in an adjoining shed. All set to make a world's record for haste in breaking camp, Swap swerved towards his objective.

Within a few short feet of it he came to an uncertain stop. His gabble of gladness turned to a calamitous croak. Perched on the corral gate, in an attitude of patient waiting, was a man with a double-barreled shotgun across his knees.

Swap knew this person only slightly. He had no desire to extend the brief acquaintance. Here was the trigger-touchy chicken rancher, owner of the land the pardners had unintentionally trespassed.

"Anybody found around here after dark will be found around here from then on," the owner of the land had said.

There was no mistaking the purpose that had brought the chicken rancher here. He cocked both hammers, exuding the pleased anticipation of a honey-licking bear that had found a bee tree. He wasn't as big as Bill Barnes. But he was a lot meaner-looking. He looked like McWhortle. The first words he said accounted for that resemblance.

"I didn't figger to lay eyes on neither of you miscreants ag'in," he rasped, "till awhile ago when I come in to git some harder-shootin' shotgun loads from Cousin Angus, told him how I stippled the hide of a suspicious character and found out where to go to finish the job."

"Lookee here, mister, this is a—a mistake! We never—that is, I ain't—"

THE chicken rancher cackled heartlessly. He had a heart like a hard-boiled egg, it was easy to see.

"Ain't no use denyin' who you are. Didn't git an awful good look at you last night. But I'd know these hosses anywhere. Start runnin'. Sort of like to try my hand at wing-shootin'."

"But listen!"

"And don't deny that you stole gosh knows how many eggs. I been missin' plenty eggs lately. Been in the lookout for you egg rustlers."

Swap's eyes roved frantically for some means of escaping the blighting blast of the shotgun. He saw Barnes' red pickup truck beside the harness shed. There was something in the back of it. He blinked and looked again.

A crate of eggs, that's what it was! Eggs! A great idea began to incubate in Swap's mind. He hoped that it would hatch out better than some Whopper had had lately. He let his gaze drop to the ground in front of him. He shifted his feet and flopped his arms in a gesture of sad resignation and managed to assume a guilty look.

"It just goes to show that a man don't never know who his friends are, don't it?" he sighed.

The egg rancher's shotgun dropped a little.

"What're you gettin' at?" he demanded.

"Can't even tell what his neighbor is up to, a feller can't," murmured Swap, watching the other man out of a corner of an eye.

"Neighbor? What neighbor? Talk plain!"

Swap gestured at the truck and the egg crate.

"Mebbe yuh ain't noticed how prosperous Mister Barnes has been lately," he hinted darkly. "Simple as ABC, ain't it?"

The egg rancher saw the egg crate. He ruffled up like a rooster and fluttered down off the corral gate.

"You mean to say—" he blurted furiously.

Swap nodded sadly.

"We got forced into it," he stated sadly. "Yessir, my pardner even had to pose as—as a he-schoolma'am."

"So Bill is behind this!" crowed the man with the shotgun. "Come to think, Cousin Angus told me that long-legged loon he took up with didn't look or act much like a schoolteacher. So that's the way of it! Bill Barnes! Where's he at now?"

Swap waggled an arm in the direction of the lane that led from the road, from where faint sounds of turmoil drifted, topped by the hearty and unmistakable voice of Big Bill Barnes.

The hard-boiled chicken rancher waited to hear no more. He started up the lane. Swap skittered into the corral a moment later and swung saddle onto the back of the bay-sorrel. The nice part of the whole thing was that he hadn't

told a lie, not really. The suspicious nature of Angus McWhortle's cousin had needed only a little priming.

Now was the time for Swap and Whopper to remove themselves from Brushy Bald and vicinity, before Big Bill and Angus McWhortle's cousin unscrambled their egg misunderstanding. Away from the Barnes ranch Swap spurted, the cheese-colored roan at rein's end.

Big Bill and the egg rancher stood face to face, in a redhot cussing contest. Whopper picked himself up out of the mud. He squished and sloshed to the fence, where he propped himself against a post. He was pretty messy, hardly aware of his little pardner's rescue appearance, until Swap let out a screech.

"Hey, Whopper! Let's brush up on our geogerphy!"

Whopper leaped and hit leather. For one who was soaked and still had some lead in his pants, he was as active as a transitive verb.

At this moment, his vocabulary exhausted, the egg man poked Big Bill in the middle with the shotgun muzzle. Big Bill batted the weapon aside. His other hand wrapped around his neighbor's neck, to wring it as he would a fryer's.

But McWhortle was too tough a bird for that. He kicked Barnes in the shin with a brass-toed boot. Barnes whooped, they swapped wallops, tangled and fell onto the culvert, rolled and plopped into the ditch.

"C'mon, let's scratch gravel!" gibbered Swap.

But he tight-reined the bay-sorrel in mid-leap, bringing it to an air-pawing halt. For a globe vaguely recognizable as Big Bill Barnes rose, his arm went to the shotgun lying on the culvert and he aimed it at Swap.

"Just one gol-darned minute, you little whizz-ant!" he spluttered. "Explain to Whang McWhortle, here, just what's inside that egg crate in my pick-up!"

Whopper felt that the forthcoming discussion didn't concern him. He acted accordingly. He departed so fast that his slim shadow had a hard time keeping up with him.

Swap flung a despairing look at his vanishing pardner, past him to the tantalizing nearness of the hills.

"Go on, explain!" shouted Barnes, holding the egg man up by the collar.

"M-Mister McWhortle, he don't look interested," Swap quavered.

"Tell him what was in that egg crate!" Big Bill croaked in the voice of a giant bullfrog, "or I'll make a plural out of you!"

SWAP didn't know. He hadn't inspected the crate. His eyes were glued in a horrified stare at Barnes' slippery finger, groping inside the trigger guard.

"Eggs," Swap guessed.

The instant he uttered the word, Big Bill dunked Whang McWhortle and held his head under, so he couldn't hear.

"You better make a better guess than that!" he gritted. "Now try again."

He hoisted the limp, wheezy McWhortle, who looked like a chocolate-dipped alligator.

"Here we go again," Big Bill said. "Name the contents of that egg crate, loud and plain, so Whang here'll be convinced!"

If not eggs, what did the crate contain? Swap shuddered and groped for an answer.

"N-nutmegs?" he ventured.

Once again McWhortle was doused in the ditch.

"My patience is wearin' thin," Big Bill said ominously, lifting the shotgun to an aim. "I give you one more try."

Once more McWhortle was hoisted. He looked to be in good shape to be convinced, though his interest in the subject was definitely diminishing. He wriggled feebly and sneezed.

Swap stared at the shotgun muzzle and knew that he had better be right this time. He ran a hand across his beaded brow and wished that the highly imaginative Whopper was there to help him out. He looked down the road again, saw a puff of dust that was his pardner.

He saw something else. Somebody on foot was waggling along the road, coming towards them. He recognized Professor Bailey, gnawing on something as he made his weaving approach. Swap's eyes fluttered back to Big Bill Barnes and the shotgun.

"Apples!" he cried frenziedly.

"Correct!" shouted Big Bill triumphantly. He gave McWhortle a reviving shake. "Hear that, Whang? That crate held apples, not eggs. Apples that I bought from Angus. You can ask him!"

He flung his soggy neighbor on the ditch bank and hauled himself up onto the culvert.

"That proves I never hi-jacked no hen fruit and wasn't in cahoots with nobody who did," Big Bill vowed. "Ain't that right, you—you half-portion of minus nothin'?"

It seemed high time to close the subject, Swap decided. The message traveled from his brains to his heels, which dug deep and hard into the bay-sorrel's ribs.

About the seventh jump, the shotgun boomed behind him. He ducked as his hatbrim flopped from the concussion and wadding sailed past him. He caught a fleeting look at Professor Bailey as he passed. The foolish grin on the face of Brushy Bald's next schoolteacher faded as the apple leaped out of his hand.

After a brief but suspenseful interval, the shotgun boomed again. Swap didn't wince this time. He wasn't worried any more about anything. The bay-sorrel was in full stride.

Soon he would be far away from the Brushy Bald school district and all educational perils and with Whopper, before that load of shot could even catch up with him.

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"Howdy grandpa," said the short man

BAIT FOR BOOTHILL

By EDWIN K. SLOAT

Old Sam Figgen thought a relative was worth a heap more than mere gold—that's why he boasted about his nephew!

EVERYBODY in the county knew, of course, that Old Sam Figgen had a nephew. Old Sam never let anyone in hearing distance forget it when he came down to Foothill at the mouth of Coldwater Canyon for an occasional visit to civilization, which really meant a visit to Joe Rack's saloon. And the drunker Old Sam got, the louder he sang his praises of his orphan nephew, Jim, down in Texas.

Finally Old Sam would be weaving in the middle of the floor like a white-haired giant with a huge, snowy spade for a beard and he'd haul out his old six-shooter. While everybody scuttled for his life, Old Sam would shoot out the hanging lamp.

At this point Town Marshal Brice would take a hand. Old Sam always minded when Brice spoke because they had ridden the river together 'way back when. Brice would take him across the street and put him in the little jail. This was merely a gesture to appease the so-called better element of the town because Brice never locked the cell door and Old Sam could leave any time he wanted to go.

Next morning Old Sam would go over to the saloon and pay for the damages with gold dust and nuggets from his heavy little poke. Then he'd get a supply of groceries from Wick's general store, mount old Duke, his horse, and go back up to his cabin on Elbow Creek, seven miles up Coldwater Canyon.

But one night Old Sam took one drink too many.

That was the night Marshal Brice noticed the two hardcases who had ridden into town off the big flats. Old Sam didn't get to the shooting stage. Instead he lost his balance, staggered clear out of the saloon, and fell off the porch.

When he tried to get up, his left leg wouldn't co-operate, and it took three men to carry him over to the jail. Brice called Doc Sherwood, who happened to be home and came down right away.

"What's the verdict, Doc?" Brice asked when the medico straightened up.

"I don't think the ankle's broken," Doc Sherwood answered. "Probably it's a sprain which can be just as bad or worse than a fracture. He'll have to stay in bed for awhile."

OLD SAM had begun to snore, so Marshal Brice covered him with a blanket and went back across the street to the saloon. Joe Rack, the pudgy owner, was just setting up a drink for the house as a sort of celebration because there was no damage to repair this time.

"Doc says Old Sam's ankle may be broken, or at least badly sprained and he'll have to stay in bed," Brice announced. "My wife's sister and her two kids are staying at my house, so I can't take him in. Which one of you hombres will take care of him till he can get around again?"

Men shifted their feet and looked at each other, then looked away. Joe Rack began to mop up an imaginary spot on the bartop.

"What's the matter with yuh keeping him in jail?" he said.

"I can't do that," protested the marshal. "There's only one cell and he's in it. Suppose I'd get another drunk, or something? Now listen— One of you men can take Old Sam home and put him up. It won't be long, and the minute he can travel yuh couldn't keep him from going back up to Elbow Creek. He'll make it right with yuh."

"It ain't the money." Joe Rack got down and sighted on the imaginary spot. "Everybody knows he's just packed with gold dust. But my old woman would just as soon I'd bring home a grizzly bear as Old Sam. It just ain't possible at my house."

"Nor mine either," said someone else.

"I'd like a word," put in Williams, the new owner of the Pitchfork outfit. "I haven't been around these parts long, but it seems to me I've heard Old Sam talk a lot about his orphan nephew, Jim. Why can't we send word to this Jim about what's happened, and ask him to come on for awhile and look after Old Sam? Maybe he'll stay. It looks to me like Old Sam is getting to the age where he needs somebody to look after him. The marshal ought to be able to put Old Sam up in the jail till his nephew gets here, then we can move him up to Elbow Creek."

"Now that's a swell idea!" exclaimed Joe Rack. "It calls for a house lick. Name yore poison, gents."

The boys responded willingly, all crowding up to the bar.

"Where does this nephew live?" Williams asked.

No one seemed to know. Joe Rack turned to Marshal Brice.

"You ought to know that," the saloon owner said. "You've known Old Sam longer than any of us."

"I never heard him say," said Brice. "But I'll ask him in the morning."

So it was settled and everybody had another drink, this time on Marshal Brice.

Marshal Brice slept late next morning, and it was Joe Rack who woke him.

"Come over to the jail," said Rack

breathlessly. "Old Sam's up and trying to saddle his horse. Can't stand on but one leg, and he's cussing like a wild man."

Brice slipped on his clothes and hurried down on the street. Quite a crowd had gathered at the jail, and Brice noticed the two hardcase strangers standing silently back a little and watching.

"Come on with that saddle!" bellowed Old Sam. "Think I can hang around here all day? I got to get home. Got a lot of work to do."

"But Doc Sawyer says yore ankle may be broken," argued Joe Rack who had returned to the jail ahead of Brice.

"Doc Sawyer's an idiot!" roared Old Sam. "There ain't nothing wrong with me."

"Why don't yuh back to bed, Sam?" Brice cut in. "We all figured it out last night. It's time yuh had somebody living with yuh up in that cabin, so we're going to send for yore nephew, Jim."

Old Sam gave him a hard look. "You're going to what?"

"We're going to send Jim a letter and tell him that yuh hurt your leg and say we think he'd better come and stay with yuh for awhile."

"You'll do nothing of the kind!" bellowed Old Sam furiously. "I ain't imposing on him nor no one else. Besides I ain't seen him since he was knee-high to a cat, and yuh think I want him to see me like this? No siree! I'll have him come when my leg's okay again. Now get that saddle on Duke and let me get started."

Joe Rack looked helplessly at Brice and Williams. Brice shook his head, and Williams threw up his hands in defeat. Someone had cinched on the saddle, so they stepped forward and lifted Old Sam aboard. Wick came with a flour sack filled with groceries he'd selected from memory, and he laid the sack across the horse's back behind the saddle, tying it on.

"How are yuh going to get off?" asked Brice.

"Fall off, you fool," snorted Old Sam. "And I'll have Duke off-saddle hisself. Git up, you crowbait."

The horse moved off up the road toward the yawning portal of Coldwater Canyon. The crowd watched him go, then retired to Joe Rack's saloon. It was only when they stood at the bar that Marshal Brice missed the two hardcase strangers.

He stepped to the door. They were riding eastward on the road out of town across the big grassy flats, already small in the distance. Brice turned thoughtfully away from the door.

OLD SAM never told anyone about the agony he endured on that ride with his ankle hurting worse with every mile, and how he had to fall out of the saddle when Duke came to a stop under the big blue spruce that stood before the cabin on Elbow Creek. Nor would he ever admit the appalling misery he endured when he unsaddled Duke and crawled to the cabin, dragging his leg and the flour sack of groceries after him.

He pushed open the door, worked his way across the kitchen into his bedroom where he got into the nearest of the two bunks and gave up.

It was mid-afternoon when he roused, got out of bed and hopped to the kitchen stove to make a fire of pine cones and make a pot of coffee. Then he got back into bed. His ankle was so swollen that he couldn't get off the boot he had forced on his foot that morning at the jail, and he had to cut away the leather with his hunting knife.

Next morning he crawled down to Elbow Creek, fifty feet from his cabin door, and bathed the swollen ankle in its rushing, icy water. It felt better after that. Content now that the leg would mend properly, he crawled back to the kitchen and set about cooking breakfast.

Within a week he was able to discard the crutch he had fashioned from a young jack pine.

He was sitting on a bench under the big spruce thinking that he'd soon have to go down to Foothill and get some groceries that Wick had forgotten to put in the flour sack, when he saw a stranger coming up the trail, a skinny hombre with a stick in his hand on which he depended for help as though he was tired.

"Take it easy, mister," called Old Sam above the noise of the creek. "The air's thin up here, but you'll get used to it after awhile."

The stranger came wearily up to the tree and sat down in its shade. He wiped his face and shivered.

"This is a tough country," he said. "The sun burns you and yuh freeze in the shade."

Old Sam chuckled. "That's right, and yuh freeze worse at night even in June. I'm Sam Figgen, Old Sam most folks call me."

The stranger looked hard at him. Old Sam was aware that his young face had a pinched, sharp look as though the stranger had seen too much of life in his twenty years and it hadn't been good. Old Sam had seen a lot of life himself and he was a good judge of such things.

"I'm yore nephew, Jim Figgen," said the stranger half defiantly.

"Jim—Jim Figgen," said Old Sam half to himself. He was silent for a moment, then he grinned in his white beard and thrust out a big gnarled hand.

"I'm right glad to see you, Jim, and welcome to Elbow Creek. You couldn't have come at a better time, 'cept that if yuh'd come a little later I'd be getting around better. It's kind of lonely up here in this canyon and it's good to have company. I hope yuh'll like it here."

"Yeh, I'll like it," said Jim shortly. "Does the creek roar like that all the time?"

"Winter and summer. Up yonder in the hills is a patch of ice called Old Squaw glacier. All summer long the sun melts the ice and the water comes rushing down the canyon here. Below us a piece it joins Coldwater creek. This old canyon would be mighty dull without Elbow Creek to talk to a man and keep him from getting lonely. Come. I'll show yuh where you sleep, and I'll fix yuh some grub."

The meal passed in silence. Afterward Jim seemed restless. Old Sam washed the dishes and dried them, then got the big wooden bucket from the corner and hobbled out to the little log stable, and began to saddle Duke.

"Where yuh going?" asked Jim who trailed him.

"Just going up to the mine."

"Mine?" Jim's voice was edged with excitement. "Where is it?"

"About half a mile up the creek. It's not a working mine, just an old shaft in the side of the ridge. Water seeps out of it, and it freezes all winter in the opening until, come spring, the ice is about three feet thick. I can mine ice for my ice box almost all summer."

Jim wanted to see it, so he tramped along beside Duke to the abandoned shaft. At Sam's direction he took the old ax and chopped enough milky-looking ice from the floor of the tunnel to fill the big wooden bucket, which Old Sam balanced in front of him on the pommel of the saddle. Sam seemed disappointed, and looked all about the place before they started back to the cabin.

"I found a little dust near that boulder one time," remarked Old Sam as they moved along the creek.

"Gold?" asked Jim sharply. "How much?"

"Two, three ounces maybe. It wasn't much of a haul."

"I'd like to do that," said Jim. "Just take a pan and wash out a hatful of gold when yuh feel like it."

Old Sam chuckled. "It ain't that simple, Jim. First you spot a likely place, then you shovel away the sand and mud till yuh get down to bed rock. Gold is heavier than sand, yuh know, and works its way down through it. You pan out the sand on the bedrock and if yuh're lucky maybe yuh'll find a pinch or so of dust. It's wearing on the muscles and the spirit."

Jim shrugged and made no comment.

NEXT morning Old Sam announced that he had to ride down to Foothill and get some more grub. He said he'd probably be gone all day, and did Jim think he could look out for himself? There was bacon, and there were potatoes in the little outside cellar among the rocks just above the cabin.

"I'll get along fine," said Jim promptly.

So Old Sam rode off down the trail and left him alone in the cabin.

When he reached Foothill, Old Sam went first to Joe Rack's saloon, hitched Duke to the porch post and limped inside. Marshal Brice was standing propped up against the wall watching a blackjack game. He looked up in surprise.

"What are you doing in town? Ankle worse?"

"My ankle's fine, and I just wanted to let all you rannies know that my nephew, Jim, has come to live with me," said Old Sam importantly. "I came down after more grub. Set everybody up a drink, Joe."

Everybody crowded round Old Sam to shake his hand and congratulate him. They told him to be sure to bring Jim to town next time he came, and he promised that he would.

But Marshal Brice remained silent and thoughtful. Presently he went back to his office and began to dig through the old reward notices.

When Old Sam got back up to the cabin at sunset Jim was sitting beside the kitchen door. His pinched face wore a baffled look and he returned Old Sam's greeting curtly. There was no sign of supper, so Old Sam went about getting it. He fried up a big platter of bacon, and made fresh biscuits. And there was butter he had brought from town, and a big pot of coffee.

Old Sam pretended not to notice that a dozen little things were out of place as though someone had ransacked the cabin hunting for something and had forgotten to put them back just like he found them.

Jim ate like a starved wolf. Then without a word he went to bed. Old Sam did up the dishes, put things to rights around the cabin, and crawled into his own bunk. Puzzled, he lay for a long time in the darkness listening to the roar and rush of the creek outside the cabin before going to sleep.

In the morning Jim seemed changed. He was somehow resigned, and in the days that followed he gave himself up to the pleasures of the canyon life, helping Old Sam out with the chores, fishing for trout in the pools along the white water creek, bringing ice from the abandoned mine shaft. Old Sam told him about the chipmunk under the cabin, and named different birds and trees for him. Jim was quick to learn.

A friendship grew up between them, and Old Sam found it good. Here was the way he had always wanted it between him and Jim, just the two of them here in the primitive solitude of Elbow Canyon. Next winter he'd put out a few traps. He and Jim could do with the income from a few pelts.

JIM made a vague remark or two about his past.

Old Sam let it go at that and didn't crowd him for details.

"You know," Jim confided one afternoon. "A fellow sure would miss the creek if it quit rushing along like that. Seems like I must have lived in some place like this when I was a little button. This seems kind of like home—"

He broke off, and shot a side glance at Old Sam, but Old Sam apparently wasn't listening.

At the end of a week Old Sam rode away one morning and returned around noon leading a saddled bay horse.

"He's yores, Jim," he announced. "Name's Deacon and he's as gentle as a summer breeze."

"Mine!" Jim's eyes widened in wonder.

Old Sam noticed that even in this short week some of the pinched look was gone from Jim's face, and his thin body seemed a trifle filled out. Jim stroked the horse's neck, then suddenly he shook his head.

"You shouldn't have done it," he said brusquely. "I've been here too long already. Yore leg is practically well now and yuh don't need me any more. I've got to be drifting. Should have gone earlier in the week."

Old Sam didn't speak for a moment, then he nodded.

"Well, Deacon's yores anyway," he said steadily. "He'll be something to take yuh home on. I sort of figured we'd have a lot of fun riding the hills this Fall. It's might pretty then. Why don't yuh stick around awhile longer? We'll go up and see the Old Squaw glacier and see where Elbow Creek starts."

"Can't be done," said Jim doggedly. "I got to be somewhere tomorrow sure."

Old Sam managed a grin. It helped choke down some of the ache in his throat.

"Anyway, take the horse."

Jim hesitated, then said abruptly, "Yeh, I'll take the horse."

THEY didn't say much more. Old Sam limped indoors and started dinner. He looked out. Jim was standing under the big blue spruce with his hands in his pockets, staring at the sombre pines, the rushing creek and the huge rocks as though they where things he wanted to remember.

They ate in silence. Old Sam fixed him some grub to take along for a lunch, and Jim mounted the Deacon horse. He shook hands with Old Sam. "So long," he said, and rode away down the trail.

Old Sam watched him out of sight then sat down heavily on the bench beside the cabin door. The canyon seemed mighty empty now.

"It's shore hard," he said aloud to the little chipmunk who had come out from under the cabin and was watching him, "to find my nephew after all these years, then lose him again—no matter what he's been."

Next day while he was eating his solitary dinner Old Sam heard Duke whinny inquiringly from the barn. Old Sam got up from the table in a hurry and limped outdoors. But Jim wasn't coming up the trail. Instead there were two strange horsemen.

As they drew near Old Sam thought there was a familiar look about them. Then he remembered. They were a couple of strangers who had stood apart from the boys the night he hurt his ankle, a couple of hardcases.

They pulled up under the big spruce and swung out of their saddles, six-shooters tied down at their hips.

"Howdy, grandpa," said one, a short, dark-featured man with a slight scar on his cheek. "Seems like I smell coffee. I could do with a bait of grub. How about you, Jake?"

The second man, who was tall and unshaven with a broken nose, nodded.

"I thought you might be my nephew, Jim," said Old Sam, hungry to talk to someone. "Come on inside and I'll rustle up some more food."

"Yeah?" said the shorter man sharply. "Where is he?"

"He left this morning. He was just here for a visit, and he said he had to be somewhere today."

They moved into the cabin and the two strangers exchanged questioning glances.

"Did he take it with him?" asked the shorter man in a flat voice.

"Take what with him?"

"He wants to know what the kid took with him, Al," Jake said.

Al looked at Old Sam. "It couldn't have been a poke of gold dust could it, grandpa?"

Old Sam's thoughts leaped to the shotgun standing out of sight behind the open kitchen door. But the shotgun was out of the question. Then came the numbing realization that Jim was in this deal, too, that he'd come first and tried to locate the dust for them. That was why the cabin had been upset when Sam returned from Foothill. That was why Jim had been so interested in mines and the panning of gold.

"Jim wouldn't do that," said Old Sam desperately. "He's my nephew."

"He says the kid is his nephew, Jake," Al said.

"Yeah, that's the best I heard yet."

Al turned suddenly on Old Sam. "Get in the bedroom," he said savagely, and struck Old Sam in the face.

Old Sam staggered back through the doorway and sprawled on the floor. They jerked him to his feet.

Al smashed him in the face again and knocked him into the big chair against the wall.

"The kid didn't get it, Jake, or grandpa wouldn't talk like that. So we're going to find out where it is. Grandpa is going to tell. Better forget yore second childhood, grandpa, and come clean. It'll hurt yuh less."

Crimson drops appeared on the snowy beard from the smashed lips beneath and trickled down in a thin stain.

"There ain't any poke 'cept the one I carried and I spent all that on a horse for Jim," Old Sam said dully.

Al's fist smashed him in the face again, and Old Sam's head bounced off the back of the big chair.

"Think hard, grandpa. We ain't playing games."

Old Sam slumped down in the chair. Sick with pain and dizziness, he made no answer. They'd kill him. He only

hoped he could hold out till they did.

"So yuh lost yore voice, grandpa? Well, I know of a cute way to find it again, and maybe yuh'll even be able to walk again."

Old Sam watched them through a sort of haze. Jake got out a long clasp knife. The blade snicked open.

Someone spoke from the doorway.

"Let up on him, Al. There ain't any gold. I know. I went over this whole set-up. He's an old man and he can't take it. Besides, you promised there'd be no rough stuff."

The tone of the voice banished the haze, and Old Sam saw Jim there in the doorway. Jim's thin face was very pale and set. When he spoke his lips hardly moved. Then Old Sam saw his shotgun which stood behind the kitchen door in Jim's hands, just hanging loose as though he'd forgotten he held it.

"Well, if it ain't the Kid," said Al softly. "Look, Jake, he comes back after he runs out on us."

"I went to the hide-out to meet you just like yuh told me," Jim's voice was strained when he spoke. "I went to tell you to forget about this deal. But you weren't there. I know yuh'd double-crossed me and had come here, so I came back. If yuh're smart, Al, you and Jake will drift out of here right now. The sheriff, or maybe the marshal from Foothill who's a friend of this old man, is on the way up the trail. I didn't squeal. I didn't even go near him. I just saw him coming a few minutes ago. But I'm not going with yuh when you leave. I'm through with you.

"You may be a step-brother of mine like you claim to be, but I don't believe it. Even a step-brother wouldn't make a little kid hold the horses while he robbed a bank, then hold it over him afterwards as a threat to line him up on all the other crooked work you've done, thinking it was the only way he could keep out of the reform school. I know I'm in just as deep as you two in the eyes of the law even if I didn't do the things of my own free will, but not any more. And yuh're not going to touch that old man again."

Al's hard eyes narrowed a trifle, but the flat, ugly grin on his lips didn't change.

"Just listen to the Kid, Jake. He thinks he knows all the questions and the answers, too—"

The knife in Al's hand jerked back for the cast. There was a sudden blast from the shotgun, and another, a double, deafening crash of gun thunder that made the windows shudder. The air was blue with gunsmoke and the odor of burnt powder was strong.

Al was down on the floor still clutching the knife for the throw, but it was a corpse that held the weapon. And across the room Jake was doubled up over the wounds in his stomach and chest. The drawn six-shooter slipped from his dead hand.

Jim lowered the smoking shotgun from his hip.

"That will sure bring the law," he said slowly. "Maybe I can get away. The law didn't see me."

"There's around twelve thousand in dust and nuggets in the mattress of yore bunk, Jim," said Old Sam. "You've been sleeping on it all week. If yuh really want to go, take it. But now you're home again, and I sure wish yuh'd stay."

"They'd hang me higher than—" began Jim.

"Too late to go anyway," interrupted Old Sam, peering out of the window. "There's Brice pulling up under the tree. Just hand me the shotgun and go out and meet him. Don't talk. Send him in to me."

Jim looked at him helplessly, then handed the empty shotgun to Old Sam, walked through the kitchen and stepped out of the cabin. At the sight of him, Brice drew his gun.

"Don't move, Kid," he warned. "I heard the shots. Did yuh kill Old Sam?"

Jim shook his head and jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the door behind him.

"Walk in ahead of me," said Brice. "No tricks either."

THEY found Old Sam sitting in his chair with the shotgun across his knees.

Brice looked at the dead men on the floor, then back at Old Sam.

"They forced their way into our cabin and tried rob me and Jim," said the old man. "I killed 'em in defense of my home just like any red-blooded he-man would do."

"It's the first time," said Brice, "I ever saw two men shot in front from where you're sitting. I reckon that bay horse outside all lathered up and worn out didn't belong to the kid?"

"Are you doubting my word, you low-down law dog?" thundered Old Sam, getting out of the chair. "I said I killed 'em defending my cabin and there ain't a jury in these parts will doubt my word. Jim, just you step outside and look after the horses while I beat some sense into this idiot's thick skull."

Jim went without a word. When he was gone, Brice spoke irritably.

"Let's be sensible, Sam," he said. "Those two on the floor are Al Krogg and Jake Climpson, wanted in half a dozen states for robbery and murder. That rannie you think is yore nephew, Jim, is the Kid, Al Krogg's step-brother. All three of them were in this to rob you. And here's what happened— They fell out over who was going to get the loot and the Kid killed them. Probably they figured to gyp the Kid out of his share. If you're not completely in yore dotage, you'll know that the Kid couldn't possibly be yore nephew, Jim."

Old Sam gave him a scornful glance.

"If you're done running off at the head, Tom Brice, just let me tell you something. I knew he wasn't my nephew a long time before you or anyone else knew it, because I never had any nephew in the first place. I ain't got a living relative in this whole world, and every time I'd go down to Joe Rack's saloon I'd hear all the hombres there boasting about their sons. I got so I wanted a son or someone to bragg about, too, so bad I could just taste it.

"Finally I made believe I had a nephew, and orphan, and I named him Jim. I'd brag about him every time I got drunk. And when this Kid, as you call him, came up the trail and said he was Jim, I knew right then and there that he was the nephew I'd been bragging about, if he wanted to be. And he wants to be or he'd never have risked his neck coming back like he did to help me out against those two skunks when they were ready to carve me up to find out if I had any gold."

How Well Do Yuh Know Yore West?

HOLA, everybody, here we have five more interestin' questions about the West. Test yore savvy by tryin' to get the plumb proper replies. Each correct answer counts 20%. If yuh get 60% or over yuh're shore a top hand. Our answers are on Page 113—but DON'T LOOK BEFORE TRYIN'!

1. What was the farthest point up the Missouri River into Montana Territory that the old river boats went?
2. Name two ways in which to break up a log jam.
3. How many miles a day did the Texas trail herds cover on the way to market? And why such a short distance?
4. Why were steers ear-marked as well as branded?
5. What was the real name of Billy the Kid?

Marty lifted the chair and brought it down on the man's head

SIXGUN AND PENCIL LEAD

By BEN FRANK

Drawing pictures was Deputy Marty DeLong's undoing until he got a line on the masked bandit of Cat-tail Springs!

MARTY DELONG was nobody's fool—even if old Zim Yager, the sheriff, said he was. Maybe Marty didn't know when not to draw pictures, but he did know when to keep his mouth shut. He didn't argue with old Zim. Instead, he unpinned the deputy's badge from his shirt and laid it on the sheriff's desk.

Zim turned the badge over in his horny fingers, emptied a stream of tobacco juice into a dented spittoon and shoved up on his stubby legs.

"Hang it, Marty," he fumed, "if yuh'd stuck to business, I wouldn't be rippin' the hide off yuh an' firin' yuh like this! But when a deputy gets to drawin' mountains and sunsets instead of keepin' his eyes an' ears peeled for a owlhooter, it's time to do somethin' about it."

"I know," Marty said unhappily. "But, Zim, you got no idea how that sunset looked over old Flattop. There was some clouds an'—"

The rising color in Zim Yager's leathery face stopped him.

"Clouds and sunsets!" Zim bellowed. His shaking fingers lifted a square of paper from the desk. On it was the drawing which Marty DeLong had been making when the masked bandit had slipped up behind him.

"I'm gonna frame this an' hang it above my desk," the sheriff went on hoarsely. "Ever' time I look at it, I'll know better'n to hire me another deputy with a talent for drawin' pictures!"

Marty DeLong turned toward the door. He was a medium-sized hombre in his early twenties, with a lean, brown face and a pair of sensitive gray eyes. This was it, he knew. The end of his chance to prove to old Zim and Katy, Zim's daughter, that he could do something besides draw pictures.

"So long, Zim," he said hollowly, and went out into the street.

He lifted his eyes to the small house next to the jail, and saw Katy standing framed in the doorway. Zim's daughter was a rather small girl, pretty and warm-eyed, with fine features and a crown of light brown hair that was almost golden in the afternoon sunlight. Her blue eyes were fixed on Marty's shirt where he'd worn the deputy's badge until a few minutes ago.

She didn't say anything.

He moved toward her uncertainly, stopped and twisted his big hat in his fingers.

"You're a picture, Katy," he said softly. "The sun on your hair an'—"

"You think too much about pictures, Marty," she interrupted. Then she smiled, but it was an unhappy smile. "I'm sorry, Marty, but—" her voice broke, and she turned and ran back into the house.

Marty knew what she'd intended to say, and inside he felt as empty as an old, discarded and wornout boot. Katy was through with him, not because she wanted to be, but because she was a sensible girl. She knew better than to get tied up with someone like him who couldn't stick to business when there was beauty in the sky and he had a sheet of paper and a pencil in his hands. Blindly he stumbled across the street to where he'd left his pinto groundhitched in front of Appleton's Feed Store.

Some people said old Zim Yager had been a fool to give Marty DeLong the deputy job in the first place. Others said Zim was smart, for almost everybody liked Marty, and even if he wasn't much good with a sixgun, he got along fine with the boys who liked to ride into Cat-tail Springs on payday and shoot the corner street lights out.

A few tongue-waggers said that Zim had given the job to Marty because of Katy; Zim wanting to prove for once and all that Marty was, or was not, made of the stuff that a girl like Katy should marry.

But as things stood now, Marty knew he'd muffed his chance. All because of his fool passion for drawing pictures.

EVER since he'd been able to hold a pencil in his fingers, he'd been drawing pictures. They were pretty good, too, even those first ones, and as Marty grew older, his drawings got better. People around Cat-tail Springs admitted he was good, and got quite a kick out of having him sketch their houses and barns and saddle horses and, now and then, themselves.

But most everybody allowed that Marty wasted too much time with a paper and pencil, and that he wouldn't amount to shucks. They said that if he'd spend more time drawing water for his small string of cattle instead of drawing pictures, he'd be better off in the long run. Which was all true enough, but Marty *had* to draw pictures just as some people have to play the fiddle, or bet on horse races.

Marty reached his pinto, tossed the reins over the animal's arched neck and caught hold of the saddle horn.

"Hi'ya, deputy," a voice drawled, and Marty turned slowly to face the speaker.

"Chillie" Walrath stood with one wide shoulder against Ed Trotter's barber pole. A smirk tugged at one side of his handsome face, and there was a malicious gleam in his frosty eyes.

Chillie was one hombre that Marty never got along with. Even when they were kids, they'd had trouble. And then

Katy Yager came into the picture, making things worse between them. Especially when Katy began to show a preference for Marty.

Chillie lifted himself away from the barber pole and hooked his thumbs under his wide gunbelt. He had big hands. Hands that knew their way around the slick handle of his Colt.

"What's this I hear about the masked bandit catchin' yuh asleep an' tyin' yuh up, Marty?" He grinned.

Marty let his eyes run over Chillie's long frame. He remembered back to the fights they'd had when they were kids. Chillie always got the better of him then. He wondered if the man still could lick him bare-fisted. His eyes rested on Chillie's sixgun. Chillie could shoot, too. He'd proved that the time he'd had trouble with a couple of hombres in a card game. Marty couldn't out-gun him, there was no doubt about that.

"I got tied up, all right," Marty answered tightly. "But I reckon that owlhooter's days are numbered. As soon as I get a little time, I'm goin' to set a trap for him."

Walrath's grin widened.

"I reckon yuh'll have plenty of time," he said. "I see yuh ain't wearin' yore badge."

"I'll be wearin' it again!" Marty retorted. He swung into the saddle. "Don't ever forget it. I ain't through with that masked owlhooter. The last laugh is always best!"

"Don't let him tie yuh up again," Chillie sneered. "Next time he might tie yuh by the neck. Tight."

Chillie's laughter followed Marty along the street. Marty felt his face burn, and a deep anger stirred him. That's the way it was when he met up with Chillie Walrath, a tight feeling hitting him in the pit of his stomach, stirring up his anger and making him talk too much.

Now he cursed himself for boasting that he'd set a trap for the masked bandit and wear the deputy's badge again. The fact was, things had happened so fast the night before that Marty had only the haziest memory of the bandit's appearance. And as for wearing the badge again, he reckoned he didn't have a chance. Not the way he'd muffed things.

For some time, the masked bandit had been operating in Pinto County, always striking with a quickness that dazed his victims so that they were never able to describe him clearly. He'd turned peaceful Pinto County into a place of terror.

"Marty," old Zim Yager had said, "sneak out to Cutter's Pass an' lay for that jasper. If yuh spot him, shoot to kill. I'll plant myself in Butte Pass. Sooner or later, he'll strike again in one place or the other."

Marty rode to Cutter's Pass, hid his horse in a wooded gully and stationed himself among the tumbled boulders along the trail. But the setting sun with the clouds ruffling up behind Flattop Mountain made him forget his mission. He spread a sheet of paper on a boulder, dug out a pencil stub and started to sketch the scene before him.

He didn't hear or see a thing until the swish of a rope jerked him to his feet. And then it was too late. The rope pinned his arms to his sides. The next thing he knew, he was bound and gagged.

That was the way old Zim Yager had found him, bound and gagged, with the half-finished sketch lying beside him. That same night, the masked bandit had stopped the stage in Cutter's Pass and had taken money and other valuables from the passengers and the driver.

MARTY sighed as he headed his horse for the rundown little ranch that his father had left him. He wondered as he rode along what had ever possessed him to tell Chillie that he'd set a trap for the bandit. Chillie would spread his boast all over town, and the first thing Marty knew, everybody would be kidding him about it. Even the masked bandit would get a big laugh, for it seemed probable that the outlaw was a local man.

Now, if Marty only had a clear picture of the man in his mind, there might be a chance—

He jerked the pinto to a stop, and a slow smile spread across his wide mouth. Maybe that was the answer! Maybe he had something there. Then he shuddered and the smile vanished from his face.

His scheme would make him a marked man as far as the bandit was concerned. Marty realized just how good this outlaw was with a sixgun. The man had done some fancy shooting just for effect—like

the time he'd put two neat holes through the crown of Sam Wheeler's Stetson the night he'd taken Sam's cattle money. A week later, he'd shot a gun out of Fred Piney's fist, and another time he'd shot the head off a running rabbit just to show he could put a bullet any place he wanted to.

Marty stared into space. He was remembering the unhappy light in Katy's blue eyes, the break in her voice. And he remembered the sneer on Chillie Walrath's handsome face. Suddenly he clamped his teeth together, squared his shoulders and wheeled his horse back toward Cat-tail Springs.

Regardless of the danger involved, he knew he was going to try to take the unhappy look out of Katy's eyes, maybe rub the sneer off Chillie Walrath's face. As for the lawman's badge—whether or not he'd wear it again wasn't so important, but at least he wanted to square himself with old Zim Yager.

"Inky" Platt was setting type in the musty office of the Cat-tail Springs *Gazette* when Marty walked in through the screenless door. The old printer straightened up and eyed Marty over the rims of his spectacles.

"Glad yuh come in," he cackled. "There's allus two sides to a story. I wanted to hear yore side of what happened in the pass before I printed it in the paper."

"I guess there ain't two sides to this story," Marty said. "I was so wrapped up in drawin' old Flattop with the sun settin' over it that I plumb forgot what I was sent out there for. The next thing I knew, I was tied up tighter than a steer for brandin'."

"Nothin' like bein' honest about it, Deputy." Platt grinned.

"I'm no longer the deputy," Marty returned sadly. "For that an' a couple of other reasons, I'm plenty sore at that masked owlhooter. That's why I'm here. I come for a dozen sheets of paper, Mr. Platt. Big sheets, like yuh print the paper on."

Inky Platt took off his glasses and stared at Marty.

"For why would yuh want all that paper?" he clucked.

"To draw on," Marty told him.

"Draw what?"

"Pictures of that masked bandit. Life-sized pictures. About six of 'em, showin' him in different poses an' at different angles just like I saw him while he was tyin' me up."

"Why would yuh want to do that?"

"I'm goin' to show these drawin's to everybody in this part of the country," Marty said in a hard, flat voice. "Even if this coyote did keep his face hid, somebody's goin' to recognize somethin' about him in one of these pictures. Somethin' that'll give him away. Like the way he stands, or bends over. Or uses his arms, or hunches his shoulders. Things like that he can't hide behind a mask."

The printer's eyes narrowed, and a slow grin began to spread out on his thin face.

"Maybe yuh got somethin' there, Marty," he said. "Ain't much question but what this bandit is a local man. Maybe someone will see somethin' in yore drawings that'll give a lead to the feller. Yuh saw him plain, eh, Marty?"

"As plain as I see you," Marty lied. "Even got a feelin' I ought to know him. Maybe when I get to work on them pictures, it'll come to me who he is."

"Care if I run a story about all this, Marty?"

Marty grinned. He'd been hoping for that question.

"No," he answered. "By the time yore next paper comes out, I'll have them pictures mostly finished and ready to show people."

Old Inky Platt bundled up the big sheets of paper and refused to take any money for them.

"It's on the house," he said, "an' good luck!"

THE *Gazette* came out on Thursday noons. Marty rode into Cat-tail Springs right after dinner the Thursday Old Man Platt printed the story. He didn't bother about getting a copy of the paper; it wasn't important how the story read. The important thing was how people would take it, whether or not they'd believe it was possible to recognize the masked man from Marty's drawings.

He left his horse in front of the Stag Saloon and pushed in through the batwings. A sudden hush filled the smoky room, and a dozen pairs of eyes fixed on him. He angled up to the bar and ordered

a glass of beer, knowing that the men had been discussing him and the write-up before he'd barged in.

Jim Pierce, the barkeep, made a swipe at the counter with a wet rag.

"Quite a write-up you got in the *Gazette*, Marty," he said.

Marty studied his foaming glass of beer.

"Ain't seen this week's paper," he murmured.

A deep silence played around the room until someone croaked, "Yuh got them pictures with yuh, Marty?"

Marty let his eyes wander lazily about the place. Sam Wheeler and Fred Piney, both victims of the masked bandit, were among those present. Old Zim Yager stood on his stubby legs near the rusty iron stove. Even Chillie Walrath was in the room, hunched over a card game with a couple of cowpokes.

"What pictures?" Marty asked innocently.

"Them pictures of this masked gunman. The ones the paper tells about."

"Oh, them." Marty sipped his beer and smacked his lips. "Why, no," he said at last. "It takes considerable time to draw life-size pictures like that. But give me another three or four days and I'll have 'em."

Chillie Walrath had raised his handsome head, and there was an un-handsome sneer on his lips.

"Got any sunsets mixed up with them pictures?" he asked.

A chuckle or two went up over the room. Everyone knew how the bandit had caught Marty drawing the sunset over Flattop.

Marty felt his fingers tighten around the beer glass. Chillie had a way of getting under his hide, making the muscles knot up in his arms and shoulders.

"Maybe," he answered evenly. "Maybe not."

"Yuh know," Fred Piney said, "yore idea sounds reasonable to me. In fact, it wouldn't surprise me none if it worked. An' I shore hope it does!"

Sam Wheeler pulled his Stetson from his gray head and put his fingers through the two bullet holes in the crown.

"Marty," he said in a flat voice, "this hombre can shoot. Did yuh ever stop to think yuh might be stickin' yore neck out, tellin' the world what yuh aim to do?"

Marty frowned at his glass. "I've give that some thought, Sam," he said slowly. "I reckon a man has got to take a certain amount of risk sometime durin' his life."

CHILLIE WALRATH laid down his cards and grinned.

"I don't think Marty's got anythin' to worry about," he said. "The whole thing sounds kinda crazy to me. I figure it will sound the same way to this masked bandit if he ever hears about it."

"An' again, it might not," Wheeler muttered.

Marty set his glass on the counter and faced Chillie squarely. He started to make a hot retort, but changed his mind. After all, he'd come here to find out what people thought about the story old Inky Platt had run in the paper, not to pick a quarrel with Chillie Walrath although there was plenty of cause for one.

"Well, sir," he said to no one in particular, "yuh'd be surprised how natural a life-size drawin' of a man can look. Of course, it may be that nothin' in these pictures will give anybody any ideas. But again—"

He let his sentence end there, turned on his heel and walked out into the early afternoon sunlight.

Old Zim Yager followed him and caught up with him at the end of the board walk in front of Appleman's Feed Store.

"Marty," he growled, "you told me yuh didn't see enough of that hombre to have a idea of what he was like!"

"I hope yuh ain't told no one that," Marty said anxiously.

"No, I ain't. But I don't get this picture idea."

Marty shoved doubled fists into the pockets of his levis and glared down at the runty sheriff.

"Just let me go ahead an' do my drawin', Sheriff," he said, "an' don't let it worry yuh."

"Another thing," Zim went on, unruffled by Marty's words. "If that jasper gets a idea you can expose him, yore life won't be worth a lead dime. Not that it's worth much more'n that now, but—"

"Thanks," Marty said dryly. "I realize I ain't much, but I can still draw pretty good pictures. Yuh ought to see the one I made of you, Sheriff. An' of Fred Piney an' Sam Wheeler. Life-size, too."

WITH that, he turned and walked away from the gaping oldster. Grinning a little at the memory of the blank look on old Zim's face, he climbed into the saddle and headed back home. He had an idea that the next few hours would tell whether or not his scheme was any good.

Once inside the old ranchhouse, Marty gave a last look around to make sure that things were just as he'd left them. He even tested the contraption he'd rigged up to open the bedroom door. It worked perfectly. Then he went into the bedroom and lit a lamp that he'd set up on a high stool. He made sure that the window shades were tightly drawn.

Smiling mirthlessly, he returned to the kitchen and shut the door between the two rooms, being careful to keep the latch open. Knowing that his gun was of no use against the speed of the masked bandit, he unbuckled it and hung it on a nail back of the stove. After this, he sharpened a pencil, stretched out in the middle of the floor and began to draw a man's head with the face hidden behind a mask.

Now, he'd come to the hardest part of his plan—the waiting. And there was no telling how long he might have to wait. The payoff might come tonight. Or, perhaps, not for several nights. But Marty had a feeling that it wasn't far away.

An hour later, he was still working on the drawing. It didn't suit him. With an impatient shrug, he wadded up the piece of paper and tossed it into a corner. He spread out another sheet on the floor, resharpened the pencil and started in again.

A slight scraping sound just outside the front door reached his ears. It sent a tingle of cold fear along his nerves, but he didn't lift his head. He felt the door being opened behind him, but still didn't glance up. His pencil went through the paper into a crasck in the flooring, and the lead broke with a little pop. Marty swore softly.

He sat up then, fished out his knife and began to sharpen the pencil. A shadow crossed his line of vision, and he lifted his eyes and saw what he'd expected to see—a man standing in the open doorway. He knew the man had been there for some time, watching him, but he let his face go slack with surprise and fear, and stumbled to his feet.

"Hold it!" the man rasped.

Marty's eyes traveled over the long length of the man. The run-over high-heeled boots, faded blue overalls tucked in at the boot tops, long arms with glove-covered hands, in one of which a sixgun was held steadily and centered on Marty's middle. The man's faded jumper fitted tightly across his wide shoulders and buttoned up under the chin. And through slits in the black mask over the man's face were a pair of glinting, burning eyes.

Marty shot a wild glance toward his own gun hanging on the wall. The masked man's eyes followed his glance, and a hoarse chuckle came from behind the black cloth.

"That gun wouldn't do yuh no good if yuh had it," the outlaw said.

"I ain't got no money," Marty pleaded, leaning weakly against a chair. "I—"

"Where are them pictures?"

Marty licked his lips. "Pictures?"

"I read Old Man Platt's paper," the man returned harshly. "I know all about them pictures. Yuh've done yore last drawin', hombre—sunsets, or what-not!"

Marty's legs seemed to give way, and he had to catch himself against the chair. The chair scraped across the floor a few inches. It was fastened by a black thread to the contrivance that opened the bedroom door. Now the door slowly swung inward, and the light from the lamp flooded through it.

"You walked into a trap, mister!" Marty barked.

The man's eyes whipped to the open door. What he saw made him gasp. His gunhand moved an inch and then froze.

Three men stood just inside the bedroom door, with the light striking their grim faces. The first man was old Sheriff Zim Yager. Backing him were Sam Wheeler and Fred Piney. Each man held a gun, and the guns were centered on the masked bandit.

The outlaw cursed softly. Slowly his hands lifted ceilingward.

"I made sure there wasn't any hosses here," he mumbled. "An' now—"

He whirled back against the wall, bringing his gun around toward the open door. The room rocked with the blasts. The three men in the doorway stood their ground, but they didn't shoot. The masked bandit triggered his last shot, laughed

crazily and flung his empty gun at the sheriff's face.

It was then that Marty DeLong lifted the chair and brought it down on the masked man's head. The chair splintered, and the outlaw crumpled to the floor. Marty lifted the chair for a second blow, but it wasn't needed. The man was out cold.

Stooping over, Marty pulled the black cloth from the man's face. Except for the bruise, the face was handsome and unmarred. It belonged to Chillie Walrath!

LATE that night, Marty sat in the Pinto County jail office, facing old Zim Yager. Sitting in chairs against the far wall were Sam Wheeler and Fred Piney.

Old Zim shoved up on his stubby legs and took a shot at the spittoon. He stamped across the small room, stopped in front of the iron-barred cell door and glared in at Chillie Walrath. Then he faced about and glared at Marty.

"I'll be a dad-blamed baboon!" he said again for the tenth time. "Marty, let's see them pictures."

Marty unrolled a bundle of paper and held up the top drawing. It showed Fred Piney, life-size, holding a sixgun.

Piney swore and sat up straight.

"That's shore me!" he exclaimed.

Marty held up the second drawing.

Sam Wheeler's eyes bugged.

"Can yuh beat that? Why, it's like lookin' in a lookin' glass!" he sputtered. "It's mighty good, Marty."

"Sure it is," Marty admitted. "Just ask Chillie. When he saw 'em hangin' just inside the bedroom door, he even emptied his gun at these pictures."

Marty unrolled the third picture, and a grin crossed his wide mouth.

"Sorry about yores, Sheriff. Looks like I'll have to make a new head for it an' patch up some bullet holes. After Chillie emptied his gun, he threw it at your head an' tore it plumb off."

"I don't give a hoot about that," Zim growled. "What I want to see is what yuh got drawed on that fourth sheet of paper."

Still grinning, but feeling mighty nervous about this fourth and last picture, Marty unrolled it and held it up where the light hit it squarely. A girl smiled out at the sheriff. A rather small girl, pretty and warm-eyed, with fine features and a crown of soft hair. She wore a wedding dress, and beside her stood a young man with a lean, brown face and a deputy's star pinned on his shirt front.

The girl was Katy Yager, there could be no doubt about that. And the boy was Marty DeLong.

A slow flush crept up into old Zim Yager's leathery face. For a moment it looked as if he might blow his top. Then a grin started in his eyes and spread down to his mouth.

"I'll be danged if I don't like that picture, Marty," he chuckled. "I reckon yuh'd better go show it to Katy, pronto. But before yuh go, mebbe yuh'd better pin this deputy badge on yuh so's she won't make no mistake about who the man in the picture is."

Marty DeLong didn't wait to hear another word. Two minutes later, he was showing the picture to Katy and seeing in her eyes a deep happiness that told him just what he wanted to know.

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The kid saw four horses hitched in front of the dripping cabin

THE KID FROM ARIZONA

By RAY HAYTON

One of four hombres was guilty of killing the button's dad, and he was plumb anxious to pick out the right one!

A YOUNG boy rode through the drizzling rain, numb, cold hands gripped tightly into his horse's scraggly mane, skinny knees pressed against skinny flanks, ragged overalls hanging loosely on his slight frame. His small face was raw from windburn, and white with cold. He looked unseeingly into nothingness, and his ill-clad body shivered from the biting wind. Now and then he slid sideways in the damp saddle, and only the tight, inflexible grip of his hands kept him astride.

The kid paid no heed to the terrain over which the weary pony jogged. His mind was too numb from hours of cold and ex-

posure to care for anything. Now and then a prairie hen, damp and dripping, fluttered with a beat of wings from under his horse's hoofs, but the exhausted pony was too far gone to shy at it.

It was nearing dusk when at last the weary, crowbait pinto came to a listless halt, and the exhausted rider aroused himself enough to look around. At the sight of the rough-hewn cabin nestled against the bluff of the cliff, some of the weariness left the pale eyes. During that moment the kid looked much older than his thirteen years, and into the pinched face came a look of hopefulness.

There were four horses hitched in front of the dripping cabin, and the kid slid from his pinto to stumble toward them. He examined their brands with frantic eagerness, and when he came to the third horse—a long-legged dun—an exultant, eager expression chased the chill from his face.

The Turkey Track brand! This was the mount, he felt sure. And the rider would be inside the cabin, sitting by a warm fire, smoking a cigarette maybe, and oiling his guns.

Body stiff and wary, legs weak and trembling, the kid walked around the horses and hesitated before the rough pine door. He reached up a hand to knock, stopped, and turning, started for his horse at a stumbling run.

He had almost reached it when he pulled up with sudden determination, and stood with the rain and wind whipping chill into his skinny frame. He reached into his pocket and drew out a curious object—a silver dollar that had been knife-cut into the shape of a star, with two links of a gold watch chain still in it, to show the purpose for which it had been fashioned. He stared at it with hard, tight face, then caressed it a moment before he pocketed it again.

Reaching up, he laboriously opened one of the damp saddle-bags that lay across the pinto, and from it took a long-barreled .45. He stuffed the gun inside his overalls and marched up to the door of the cabin. This time he rapped grimly on the panel.

The door was opened by a tall, thin man dressed in faded levis. He had a skeletonlike face, and skin that was tanned the color and texture of old leather. He looked at the half-frozen kid for a long minute, then his eyes went to the tired old pinto hitched to the post.

"What yuh want?" he asked gruffly.

"What yuh think I want, weather like this?" the kid retorted defiantly. "Lodgin' —and mebbe a bite or two of grub. You mebbe sayin' yuh can't spare it?"

The thin man chuckled and stepped back.

"Come on in," he said. "I like the way yuh asked for it. Yuh're welcome to share what we got. This ain't our cabin—we're just borrowin' it for the night."

THE kid stepped past him into the room, his back stiff as a poker. Once inside, and the door closed behind him, he stood still and looked around the room.

There were four men in the small cabin. The tall, thin man, two cowpokes in usual range garb seated at the rough table, and a short, fat, greasy-looking man with small eyes, who sat on a wooden crate near the pot-bellied, red-glowing stove.

"We got company," the thin man said. "But afore we offer him grub and a place to sleep, mebbe we better get introductions. What they call yuh, bub?"

"Mike," the kid said. "And don't go askin' for last names. Mike is enough."

"An old owlhooter," said the thin man laughingly. "My moniker's Lanky—and you can see why. The two gun-totin' cattle-rastlers at the table are Jim and Penny, and the gloomy-lookin' coyote huggin' the stove is Half-Hitch. We got beans and sourdough. Yuh cravin' a bite?"

"Ain't cravin' nothin' else but," the kid said, and boldly pulled a chair up to the table.

Lanky got him a plate and a knife, and Penny silently shoved him the beans. Mike took a plateful of the beans, got a biscuit in one hand, and began to eat the beans with the knife.

Half-Hitch watched him silently for a moment, then eased his bulk around so he was facing the kid.

"From where yuh come?" he asked.

"Down the road a piece," Mike said through the beans. "An' I'm goin' up the road a piece."

"A good answer," Lanky chuckled. He sat down at the table across from Jim. "Where're yore folks?"

"Dead and buried." The kid made the statement flat, but he seemed to have

trouble swallowing the next knife-load of beans. "Dead and buried—and dern near forgotten."

"That's too bad," Penny said. 'Yuh ain't got no relatives?"

"Not that I know of," Mike admitted. "An' don't go offerin' no sympathy. I ain't needin' none." He swallowed the last of the beans, stuck the knife point down in the table and lifted his head to look around at the four men, meeting each one's eyes squarely. "All I'm needin' is a little luck."

"An' a job, mebbe?"

"I got a job. It's to finish the job I need the luck." The kid hesitated, seemed to debate with himself, then said, "I'm lookin' for a man."

"Ain't we all?" Half-Hitch said. "For what yuh want a man?"

"For a killin'." Something about the way Mike said it, even in his thin, reedy voice, made the statement sound flat and positive. "For a quick, shore killin'."

"Yuh're an awful young younker to be talkin' of killin'," Jim spoke up for the first time, his round face serious and his eyes speculative. "What yuh got the killin' itch for?"

"You ask a lot of questions," Mike said. The warmth was beginning to creep through him now, and his thin body had stopped shivering. "I'll answer 'em all now, so yuh'll let me sleep in peace later. It ain't a long story. My pop owned a small ranch, run it by hisself after my mom died. He had a distrustin' of banks, and kept the cash from his cattle sales at home.

"Some hombre heard of it, and come lookin' for it while I was away to school. He tortured pop and made him tell where the money was, then killed him. To hide his doin's, he burned the house—and that took care of my pop, and the ranch as well."

The kid looked around defiantly. His voice was steady as he concluded his story.

"Me—I couldn't run no ranch, not till I got the hombre that killed Pop. So I took off to look for him."

"It's a big world," Lanky said. A powerful big world. How yuh expectin' to know this hombre when yuh see him?"

"By the hoss he's ridin'," Mike told him, looking straight in his eyes. "And by other sign I found near the house. And it ain't too big a world for me to find him. You mebbe got a bunk I can crawl into?"

"No bunk," Lanky said, "but there's a spare corner, and a couple of hoss blankets. You expectin' a hotel suite, mebbe?"

Mike didn't answer that. He dragged the two blankets over to the corner and made a bed of them. Then he turned around, walked back to stand over Half-Hitch.

The fat man looked up at him, and his thick lips curled back in a half snarl.

"Yuh want sumpin'?" he asked.

"Not shore," Mike said. "Not yet. Yuh been over Arizona way lately?"

Half-Hitch seemed about to strike the kid, then he relaxed and forced a laugh.

"Yuh think mebbe I'm the jasper yuh're lookin' for?"

"Mebbe. What hoss yuh ridin'?"

"The long-legged dun with the Turkey Track brand," Half-Hitch said easily. "That the hoss yuh lookin' for?"

Mike knew the three men were watching him closely, though none of them seemed to be. He forced his lips into a thin smile.

"Nope," he said. "That ain't the one."

"Meanin' one of us is ridin' the hoss yuh're lookin' for?" Lanky asked. "Yuh mean it's hitched outside?"

"It is," Mike agreed. "It's hitched there, all right. One of you is the jasper I want. You four been ridin' together since, say, month afore last?"

"We ain't," Penny said, his long lean face thoughtful. He looked from Lanky to Jim, back to Half-Hitch. "We been ridin' separate. We just happened to pick this cabin to hole up in at the same time. What hoss is it yuh want?"

"I got some sense," the kid said. "I tell you—and I get ventilated. I got my eye on the jasper, and come the proper time, they'll be a killin'. Right now, I got to get some shut-eye."

IGNORING any further questions, he marched over to the blankets and lay down on his back, staring at the ceiling. After a moment silence fell on the room, and he closed his eyes. Soon his breathing became regular and even.

"He ain't asleep," Lanky said, "I know that. But it don't make no matter. Reckon that story he told is straight fact?"

"I'm bettin' it is," Half-Hitch growled. "And I'm bettin' we got a killer and a

torturer bunkin' in here with us. Which one of yuh is it?"

"You ain't got no call lookin' at me," Penny said. "I bought my Twin Fork cayuse from a jasper only week afore last. It couldn't be it—I don't think. 'Sides, I think the kid's lyin'. He's driftin', and lookin' for handouts, and tellin' that story to make hisself feel important. Ain't none of us no killer."

"How yuh know?" Lanky asked softly. "Yuh know the rest of us all yore life? We know you that long? I think the kid's tellin' the truth—and I think one of you three is the man he wants. If I was that hombre, I'd hightail it afore the kid wakes up. He's a skinny little runt—but all guns is the same size. He can kill quick as a grown-up, and he's got the stomach for it. Or I'd kill him in his sleep—only don't try it, cause the rest of us won't stand for it."

"That we won't," Jim said. "Matter of fact, we might even help him get the jasper he wants, if we knew who he was."

"I think it's a high-wind tale," Penny scoffed, "and I'm hittin' the sack. I got ample ridin' ahead of me tomorrow."

"Mebbe yuh're hittin' the sack," Lanky said, a grin splitting his skeletonlike face, "but I ain't. A jasper what killed once will do it again, and I reckon he might get good pickin's outa the three of us. I'm stayin' up."

"And me," Jim said thoughtfully, "I guess you all seen what I got in that saddle bag in the corner, though I didn't mean for yuh to. He'd like to get his hands on that, I reckon."

"I'm sittin' up until dawn comes," Half-Hitch stated. "Then I'm hittin' the trail. I don't crave no more of the company I'm in."

"I ain't worried." Penny uncoiled his lean bulk from the chair. "I ain't guilty, and I ain't thinkin' nothin' will happen with you three keepin' a watch on each other. And I can use the shut-eye."

He walked over to the bunk in the corner and lay down, and after a few minutes began to snore.

The three men sat silent for almost an hour, each looking furtively at the other, until at last Half-Hitch pulled his fat bulk up from the chair and began to curse.

"The devil with it!" he snarled. "Rain or no rain, I'm hittin' the trail! This is more'n I want—this sittin' around, not knowin' what is gonna happen next. I'll find me a better place to bunk."

"Not now," Lanky said flatly. "Just stay put. I'm on the side of the kid. He's got an ace up his sleeve, and I got a hunch we'll have our killer afore we leave this cabin. You better stay and get in on the killin'."

"I'm leavin'!" Half-Hitch said, his face ugly, his hand dropping to the six-gun buckled around his waist. He stopped the movement cold when Lanky shifted his lean frame and showed his own hand poised over his gun. Half-Hitch glared, then slowly sat down again.

Jim was sitting at the table, arms resting on the rough pine surface. After a few moments he began to nod, eyelids drooping. His head slid forward onto his arms, and it wasn't long before he was breathing regularly.

"You and me." Lanky looked at Half-Hitch. "You and me left awake. Mebbe one of us is the feller the kid wants. If so, best thing we could do would be draw our shootin' irons. Time the rest of them wake up, one of us would be dead, and the other in control of the cabin, with the drop on the rest. You mebbe want to go for yore gun?"

Half-Hitch looked him over, his face speculative, his little eyes glinting. After a moment he shook his head slowly.

"If yuh're the killer," he said, "make yore play—and I'll try to stop yuh. Otherwise I'll wait."

"You ain't kiddin' me," Lanky said. "Nor the rest, neither. I know yuh're the man. The kid spotted yuh right off. Yuh're the killer, no doubt of that."

"Then why don't yuh draw that shootin'-iron, instead of keepin' it hand-warm?"

"It ain't my play," Lanky said. "I lived to be old as I am by not pushin' trouble. Come dawn, if the kid don't do nothin', you can ride on. The play's up to him. I'm just backin' him enough to give him a chance at makin' it."

"An' I'm makin' it!"

They both turned their heads to see the kid sitting up on the blankets, the big, long-barreled .45 in one skinny fist.

"I was just waitin' for a chance to get to my shootin' iron unnoticed," he said. "You give it to me. You ready to die, Half-Hitch?"

The fat man still had his hand on his gun, but he was facing half away from the kid, only his head turned toward him. His fat face was heavy and inscrutable.

"Yuh got the wrong man, kid," he said.

"I got the right man," Mike said. "You mebbe got a timepiece on yuh? I crave to know the time."

"It's near midnight."

Half-Hitch made no move.

"I crave the exact time."

HALF-HITCH looked at him from under heavy lids, then with slow deliberation, reached into his vest pocket and drew out a watch. It was yellow gold, with large figures on the face, and sported a gold watch chain with a jade-wolf charm. At sight of it the kid's face was puzzled.

"Yuh're ridin' the right hoss," he said, "leastwise, one with the right brand. But yuh got the wrong kind of charm on yore watch. Yuh shouldn't have none."

"Yuh got the wrong man, all right," a soft voice said from the corner, and all eyes swiveled to where Penny sat on the edge of a bunk, a .45 gripped in his hand, his lips curled back in a mirthless grin. "I got the watch with the silver star lost off the chain. I swapped that Turkey Track hoss two-three weeks ago for a Twin Fork cayuse. I heerd yuh was trailin' me. Well, here's where I get rid of you. Let fall that gun!"

The kid's gun was still pointing at Half-Hitch, and it would take him too long to swivel it toward Penny. Reluctantly, he let it drop to the blanket.

"So yuh're the dirty, sneakin' coward that tortured Pop," he said. "Yuh're the coyote that murdered him. Well—yuh'll get yores for it yet."

"Not me, I won't." Penny got lithely to his feet. "I'm too smart for that. I figgered you had Half-Hitch spotted as the killer, 'cause he was ridin' a Turkey Track hoss. And I figgered that you was playin' possum so's yuh could get the drop on him—so I did the same. Only I outpossumed you. And when I leave here I'm takin' the gold from Jim's saddle-bags with me—and leavin' behind four folks that won't talk, a-tall."

"Yuh figger on killin' us all?" Lanky hadn't moved a muscle since the kid had first spoken. "Yuh figger on killin' us all in cold blood?"

"Why for should I give you an even break and make it tough on myself?" Penny asked. "I believe in takin' things the easy way. How about you wakin' up Jim? I never did like to shoot nobody in their sleep."

Lanky started to reach over and shake Jim's shoulder—then stopped the movement cold. Jim's head lifted off his arms, and there was a .45 in one steady hand, pointing at Penny. The standing man's eyes widened, and his finger tightened on the trigger with desperate haste. The blast of his shot sounded just a second behind Jim's, and his bullet ripped harmlessly into the floor. Penny was flung against the bunk by the force of Jim's bullet. He collapsed onto it and lay limp, with arms outflung.

"He shoulda known better'n to think I was asleep," Jim said calmly through the smoke that curled up from his gun. "Especially after he pulled the same trick." He looked over at the kid, now white-faced and wide-eyed. "You can go back to that ranch in Arizona now," he said gently. "Yore dad's done been avenged."

The kid picked up the .45 and got slowly to his feet. Now that the rage and hate were gone, he seemed twice as young, and skinnier than ever. He began to walk toward the door, scuffing his feet. At the door he turned and looked at Lanky.

"I got a fair-size spread," he said. "It's powerful run down—my dad never havin' been a spendin' man—but it could be made into a first class place. Only pop never hired no help—so I got none. And," he finished wistfully, "I ain't got no money—not any more."

"Them saddle-bags ain't full of bricks," Jim said, grinning at him. "They got the profits from a trail herd I bought in Texas and drove to Kansas. And now I'm lookin' for a good ranch to buy into. Yuh think yuh could use a pardner and," he nodded at Lanky, who grinned back at him, "a foreman and"—he gave Half-Hitch a long, searching look—"mebbe a fair-to-middlin' cattle-rastler?"

The kid didn't really have to answer that. The answer showed plain and clear in every line of his skinny frame.

"I reckon!" he exclaimed. Then he tossed his .45 clear across the room. "And I won't need that no more. We ranchers got no need for shootin' irons!"

Jackson grabbed the wrist holding the knife

NO MORE INDIANS

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

Old Shawnee Clark always kept his single shot Sharps handy in case of emergency — and finally got a chance to use it!

IT HAD been close on to three years since Jim Jackson and Ed Warren had spoken a word to each other. The folks in Cactus Valley figured it was a shame the two men had to feel that way, seeing as they were neighbors. Jim Jackson, whose father had once been a sheriff, owned the Lazy J outfit and Ed Warren bossed the Flying W over south of him. Both men had inherited their spreads from their parents.

"Just what caused the quarrel between Jackson and Warren?" a stranger in the valley asked old Shawnee Clark, hotel proprietor.

"Hot weather and hot tempers," answered Shawnee.

For ten years Shawnee Clark had

been sitting on the porch of the hotel in the little cowtown, his old single shot Sharps beside him as he waited for an Indian attack. Since the nearest Apaches were a hundred miles away, living peacefully on the reservation, Deerhorn folks thought the old scout's guard duty was right futile.

All the same the gray-bearded oldtimer missed mighty little that went on around him. From his favorite chair on the porch he heard and saw everything and told most of it.

"Hot weather and hot tempers," repeated the stranger, seating himself in a chair beside Shawnee on the porch. "Let's have the story."

Shawnee studied the stranger. Nearly eighty years of taking care of himself, a lot of them spent when the country was really wild and dangerous, had taught the old scout to size a man up quickly. He wasn't sure whether he liked this big stranger or not.

"What's yore name?" Shawnee asked. "I'm Shawnee Clark."

"Why, I'm Val Harvey," said the stranger. "Heard this was good country for ranching and aim to look around and see if I can buy a spread."

"You shore come to the wrong place for it," said Shawnee drily. "Only four ranches in the valley and I never heard of any of the owners hankerin' to sell."

"I might be able to talk one of them into changing his mind," said Harvey, moving around in his chair so his holstered gun rested more comfortably against his right leg. "But what about Jackson and Warren?"

"Nice fellers—I like them both," said Shawnee, who sometimes seemed a lot dumber than he actually was to those who didn't know him well. "But I don't reckon either of them would sell."

"I meant what made them stop speaking to each other," said Harvey, a faint note of impatience in his deep voice.

"Oh, that." Shawnee peered along the street and at the dusty winding road to the West of the town. "Riders comin'. Mebbe it's Injuns!"

"Huh?" Val Harvey looked at the old scout in surprise. "What Indians?"

"Never mind." Shawnee sighed. "About Jim Jackson and Ed Warren—it started one hot August mornin' about three years ago. Weather had been hot and dry all that summer, with no rain for a long time. The creeks in the valley had all near dried up. Lot of the ranchers had been losin' stock on account of not havin' water."

SHAWNEE stopped and gazed at the four riders who were coming into town. They were Jim Jackson and three of the Lazy J waddies. Jackson rode a little in the lead of the other horsemen, a big, dark-haired man who was still young, but left no doubt that he bossed his own outfit.

The old scout glanced at Val Harvey. The stranger was staring at Jackson. Shawnee was startled by the expression of bitter hate he saw on Harvey's face. It lingered for an instant and then was gone.

"That's Jim Jackson and some of his men ridin' in now," Shawnee said casually. "Jackson's the feller ridin' up front."

"So that's him," said Harvey. "Heard about him, but this is the first time I've seen him. Never set eyes on Warren either."

The four horsemen were passing the porch now, heading for the Glad Hand Saloon farther up the street. Jackson saw Shawnee and waved but the owner of the Lazy J did not appear to recognize the stranger.

Little clouds of dust rose from beneath the hoofs of the horses, saddle leather creaked and a bit chain rattled. The three waddies with Jackson all grinned at the old scout and nodded. Jackson rode on, a little to the left of his men, his broad back toward the porch.

Shawnee saw Harvey staring at Jackson's back. The expression of hate was again on the stranger's face. His hand touched the butt of his gun, and he was tense. It looked as if Harvey was longing to shoot Jackson in the back.

"So that kind of weather made folks right short-tempered," said Shawnee casually. "Jackson and Warren rode into town about the same time that mornin'—" The old man stopped and glared at Harvey. "Hey, you ain't listenin'."

"What?" Harvey drew his hand away from his gun and stared at the old man

as though seeing him for the first time. "Oh, yes, I must have been thinking about somethin' else. You were tellin' me about what started the quarrel between Jackson and Warren."

"Was I?" snapped Shawnee. "I figgered I was just talkin' to myself."

"I'm plumb sorry," said Harvey. "Go on, tell me what happened."

"Well, Jackson and Warren stopped at the hitchin'-rail out in front of the hotel there." Shawnee nodded to the rail just a few yards away. "Warren fastened his hoss at the right end of the rail—wasn't any other hosses there then. He tied his reins to the rail, and comes back to loosen his cinch, like a man will when he aims to stay in town awhile."

"Then what?"

Jackson and his men had left their horses at the hitching-rail in front of the Glad Hand and gone into the saloon. The dusty street was hot and quiet.

"Then Jackson ties his hoss at the left of Warren. He goes back to loosen his cinch. As he does his hoss moves over and brings his right hind hoof down hard on Warren's foot. Warren claims that Jackson jabbed the hoss on purpose so it would move over and step on him. Jackson called Warren a liar. I was settin' right here and seen and heard the whole thing."

"They fight?" asked Harvey.

"No. I thought one of them would cut loose a punch at the other, but neither of 'em did. They just went into the hotel here to see a cattleman who was in town at the time, though he shore wasn't buyin', anyway Jackson and Warren ain't spoken a word to each other since then."

"Seems a silly thing to quarrel over." Val Harvey got to his feet and for a man who was talking about buying a ranch he didn't look very prosperous. His range clothes were worn and dusty. "Jackson's horse probably moved accidentally, like they will."

"It did," said Shawnee.

"Thanks for telling me about it, Shawnee," Harvey said. "I'll see you again."

"Uh-huh." The old man leaned back in his chair. "You shore will."

He sat watching Harvey go down the worn wooden steps of the Deerhorn Hotel porch. The stranger's roan was standing at the hitch-rail. The horse looked like it had been ridden a long way. It had been just a couple of hours ago that Shawnee had seen the stranger first ride into town. Harvey had gone to the saloon and then drifted down to the hotel.

THE roan had been standing there in the sun ever since Harvey had ridden into town. Shawnee didn't have much respect for a man who would treat a horse like that. In fact the more he thought about it, the less Shawnee liked Val Harvey.

Harvey got his horse and rode down to the livery stable. He left the roan there and went to the Glad Hand Saloon. Shawnee watched from the porch and then sighed when Harvey disappeared through the swinging doors. The old scout was glad the saloon was diagonally across the street from the hotel. It made it easy for him to watch everything that went on there.

A half hour passed and then Ed Warren came riding into town alone—a lean tall, blond man on a black horse. He saw Shawnee on the porch and stopped at the rail in front of the hotel.

Warren tied the horse to the rail and then came up on the porch to talk to the old-timer.

"How yuh gettin' along these days, Shawnee," Warren asked as he dropped into the chair beside the scout and drew out the makin's. "Ain't seen you for a few weeks. Any sign of them Indians."

"Not yet, Ed." Shawnee shook his head. "But they could be headin' this way." The old man's bright blue eyes glared at the owner of the Flying W. "You make me sick—and that goes for Jim Jackson, too."

"Huh?" Warren nearly spilled the tobacco out of the cigarette he was rolling, he was so surprised.

"You heard me!" snapped Shawnee. "For the past three years you and Jim Jackson have been actin' like a couple of school gals. First quarrelin' over nothing, and then not speakin' to each other ever since. That ain't the way for a couple of full grown men to act."

"Funny," said Warren. "For the last

month or so I been feelin' the same way about it. Course Jim was wrong in callin' me a liar, but a man says a lot of things he don't mean when a hoss steps on his foot."

"Had it happen to me once or twice," remarked Shawnee, "and I shore said a plenty. Cussed everybody in sight from here to Tuesday." He looked at Warren. "Jim Jackson is in the saloon now, Ed. Why don't yuh go patch things up with him."

"I will," said Warren. "Been thinkin' of doin' just that for sometime now."

"I'd like to see this and I could stand a drink." said Shawnee as he got to his feet. "I'll go along with you, Ed."

The old scout left his Sharps standing beside his chair as he went down the steps and across the street with the owner of the Flying W. Warren stepped into the saloon first with Shawnee not far behind him.

Jackson and his three waddies were standing at the bar drinking. Further along the counter Val Harvey stood alone, a half empty glass near him. All five men glanced toward the door as Warren and Shawnee entered.

"Want to talk to you, Jim" Warren said as he walked toward the bar. He was nervous, and it made his tone harsh, and his words seem curt.

"What about?" Jackson demanded tersely, his hand close to his gun as he faced the other ranch owner.

"Don't try it, boss," said Harvey abruptly, looking at Warren. "Yuh'd be a fool to start anythin' now when Jackson has three of his men sidin' him. Told yuh to let me handle this my way."

Shawnee felt a little sick deep inside him as he stood near the door, listening and watching. Harvey's words made it look like Warren had come into the saloon with the deliberate intention of forcing a showdown with Jackson, instead of patching up the quarrel.

"So that's it," snarled Jackson, glaring at Warren. "You ain't man enough to do yore own fightin' so yuh hire a gunman to try and down me when he gets the chance."

"That's a lie," snapped Warren. He stared at Harvey. "I've never seen this man before in my life. Just what he figgers on gainin' by calling me 'Boss' and actin' like he is workin' for me, I don't know."

"It's no use, Boss," said Harvey quietly. "These hombres ain't goin' to believe that now."

"You called me a liar for the second time, Ed," said Jackson. "And I'm goin' to beat the stuffings out of yuh for it. Shuck yore gunbelt and I'll teach you a good lesson."

"Suits me," said Warren.

BOTH men removed their gunbelts and stepped out into the street at the request of the bartender. The three Lazy J waddies followed and then Harvey moved to the door. Shawnee stepped up behind the stranger. The scout's old Colt .44 was in his hand, the long barrel jabbing into Harvey's back.

"Told yuh that Jackson and Warren were my friends," Shawnee said softly. "I don't know why yuh been tryin' to stir up trouble between them, but yuh're not goin' to get away with it."

"You old fool," said Harvey softly. "Keep out of my business or I'll kill yuh."

Outside in the dust of the street. Warren and Jackson had started to fight. Fists were flying and they were both landing heavy blows.

Harvey stepped out through the swinging door. Then he suddenly leaped aside, slamming the door back so it hit Shawnee squarely in the face so hard that everything went black and the old man dropped to the floor unconscious.

When he finally opened his eyes he found his shirt was wet and the bartender was pouring water into his face. Shawnee sputtered and sat up.

"What happened?" Shawnee asked as the bartender helped him to his feet. "Who won the fight, or is it still goin' on."

"Been over for half an hour," said Mike Tilson, the bartender. "You run into the door and knocked yoreself out. Me and that stranger carried yuh into this back room and left yuh here."

"But what about the fight?" asked Shawnee. "Who won?"

"It was a draw," said Tilson. "Time it was over Warren and Jackson seemed right friendly. At least they were talking to each other and that ain't hap-

pened in years."

"Where are they now?" asked Shawnee.

"Headin' for home, I guess," said the bartender. "They came in and got their gunbelts, put them on, and then left. Jackson sent his waddies on out to the ranch and rode away with Warren." Tilson frowned. "That stranger left before they did—he went out the back way after helpin' me carry you here. Funny thing when he thought I wasn't looking I noticed him foolin' around Warren and Jackson's guns."

"Oh, he was, eh," said Shawnee. "I don't like that."

The old scout had a hunch and he decided to act on it. For the first time in years Shawnee Clark had decided to leave town and take a ride. He left the saloon and went to the livery stable. Here he learned that the stranger had taken his roan and left town.

Shawnee hired a horse and rode out. He stopped at the hotel porch and got his Sharps rifle. Then he rode out of town in the direction he had learned that Warren and Jackson had taken.

The weather had changed. There were dark clouds in the sky and it looked like a bad storm was coming soon. Shawnee found it was good to be in the saddle again, though he rode a bit stiff and awkwardly after not having been on a horse in so long.

Three miles beyond the town he found what he had been afraid that he might discover. It was a still figure sprawled in some brush at the side of the road. Shawnee rode closer and dismounted. He found it was Ed Warren lying there. He had been shot high in the chest and was badly wounded, but still alive.

"Harvey done it," Warren muttered as he opened his eyes and saw Shawnee. "Drygulched me. Guess he wanted—folks to think me and Jim quarreled again—and that Jim done it. Funny my gun was empty. Jim went after Harvey."

Shawnee remembered what the bartender had told him about Harvey fooling around Warren and Jackson's guns. Harvey had unloaded those Colts then—and now Jim Jackson had gone after a killer with an empty gun.

"I got to go find, Jim," said Shawnee. "You'll be all right until I get back I reckon. Just yuh wait here."

"I wasn't goin' any place," said Warren with a weak smile.

Shawnee hurried to his horse, mounted and rode on. Finally he came to a windy expanse of level table land. The storm clouds hovered over the scene. Way in the distance he could see a horse standing ground-hitched, but it was the two figures closer to him that held his attention.

JACKSON and Harvey were struggling on the ground. Harvey had a knife and was trying to get Jackson with it. As Shawnee rode closer he saw Jackson grab the wrist of the hand in which Harvey held the knife. Then Jackson snatched out his gun with his other hand.

"He don't know his gun ain't loaded," muttered Shawnee. "And I'm too far away to tell him."

The two men got to their feet. Jackson released his grip on Harvey's arm and stood covering him with the gun. Shawnee halted his horse, even though he was still some distance away. He raised the Sharps to his shoulder.

Harvey suddenly leaped forward the knife upraised to strike. Jackson wildly snapped the hammer of the empty gun. At the same time Shawnee aimed carefully and fired. The heavy bullet from the Sharps struck Harvey's upraised arm—and with the impact of that fifty caliber slug the stranger lost all interest in trying to kill Jim Jackson.

"You got him, Shawnee," said Jackson as the old scout rode up. "Good thing you came along—my gun was empty."

"I know," said Shawnee. "Figgered it would be." He went to Harvey, who had dropped to the ground moaning. "Now mebbe yuh'll tell us why yuh been so sot on killin' Jim Jackson."

"Hate him," muttered Harvey. "He is the son of Sheriff Jackson."

"Shore," said Shawnee. "But Sheriff Jackson has been dead for nearly ten years."

"I know," said Harvey. "And I spent those ten years in prison. Sheriff Jackson sent me there for cattle rustling. I swore I would make him suffer when I

got out. Then I learned he was dead and decided to kill Jim Jackson because he was the sheriff's son."

Abruptly Harvey's gun appeared in his left hand. He laughed wildly as he aimed it at the owner of the Lazy J. Shawnee lifted the Sharps and then lowered it for the single shot rifle wasn't loaded now.

"I got yuh both now," said Harvey. "Yore guns ain't loaded."

Suddenly Jackson's gun roared. Harvey died with a look of surprise on his face as the bullet got him in the heart.

"I reloaded while yuh were talking to him, Shawnee," Jackson said. Then he frowned. "Too bad he killed Ed Warren"

"He didn't," said Shawnee. "Ed is still livin', though he is hurt bad. We better get him to a doctor."

"Then come on," said Jackson impatiently. "Wouldn't want anything to happen to Ed Warren. He's my friend."

When they had ridden back to the spot where Warren had been left and found that he was still alive, Shawnee rode to town for a doctor and a buckboard. As he rode the old scout grinned.

"Won't have to pretend I'm lookin' for those Injuns no more," Shawnee said. "Just did it 'cause I craved excitement—and I shore got it today."

THE HITCHING RAIL

(Continued from page 9)

Perry writes he's sure interested in grasses, and is readin' and askin' questions on the subject wherever he figgers he can get information. He's come across the term "Chino grass" in one o' the agricultural magazines, and wants to know what and where.

Chino grass comes from Mexico, though it grows some north o' the Border in the southwest, 'specially in the Big Bend country o' Texas. There's not enough for grazin' horses plentiful, but cattle do pretty well on it. For horses, some o' the ranchers bring it up from Mexico by burro.

It's a long, curly grass, and grows in the mountain regions, so the little burro o' the southwest is the most practical means o' transportation. It's fed by throwin' on the ground, though some outfits use hayracks.

It Don't Mean "Curly"

"Chino" is the Spanish word for Chinese, and the grass is so called because it resembles some of the grasses o' China. It don't mean "curly" like some folks think. Spanish word for "curly" is "rizado".

A Big Bend rancher will hire a Mexican to bring him Chino grass from Mexico. The Mexican will take two other men, say, and ten burros, and ford the Rio Grande where it's shallow and wide.

They'll pack each burro with six bundles o' grass, each weighin' about 30 pounds, or a hundred and eighty pounds to the load. This grass sells to the rancher at about ten cents a bundle.

In addition to bein' a fine feed for stock, Chino grass is a sure fine grass for mixin' with adobe mud for makin' the native 'dobe bricks. It's sure a picturesque sight to watch the little burros bein' drove along, windin' in and out amongst the sand dunes and mesquite and greasewood bushes, almost hid from view by the load o' shaggy grass on their backs.

Well, fellahs and gals, keep the hay seeds out o' yore hair 'til next month at the Hitchin' Rail, when we meet to palaver some more, and generally chew the fat.

Buck Benson

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

THERE will be another great Walt Slade novel in the next issue of THRILLING WESTERN. Bradford Scott has written a truly outstanding masterpiece of western fiction in this new yarn, called THE LAND OF TRADITION.

A storm was roaring in from the Gulf of Mexico. Broad in its sweep, the storm thundered across the bayous and salt marshes of the Sabine Pass, up the valley of the Nueces, along the windings of the Sabine River, until it burst in fury over sinister, mysterious Caddo Lake.

To Walt Slade—known to many as *El*

Halcon, The Hawk—the storm-tortured lake seemed like something lifted from a long dead age. He sat Shadow, his great black horse, in the fitful light of a wild, white moon, looking along the maze of the lake's half-sunken shore line where giant cypresses stood deep in murky water.

In truth, this was a country where anything seemed possible, a country of legend and tradition, where old Coffin Head, the giant rattlesnake, prowled the thickets. Where the ghost of a murdered woman haunted a tree and protested bitterly about having been buried beside the relatives of the husband who slew her.

It was a land of "hants" and fabulous monsters, too, where folks retained a firm belief that conjure balls could dry up wells. Where "little men in green" flit through the woods on moonlight nights and hold high carousel with leprechaun and pixie and goblins damned.

As Slade sat gazing across the lake's turgid water, a sound drifted to him on the wind, a pulse-quickening, nerve tautening beat that could only be coaxed from a snake-skin drum by a hand that was Congo black.

"Conjure drum," Slade muttered. "Somebody working up a spell out there. No wonder there's trouble in this section."

The unseen drum boomed an imperative command, paused, thundered three regular, evenly spaced beats.

Slade continued to stare across the roily water, his black brows drawing together. He had an uneasy premonition that all was not right out there in that awesome wilderness of hidden bayous. To his ears came a faint grumbling, as of scantily muffled oarlocks. A shadow moved from the deeper gloom of the trees to more open water.

"A boat," *El Halcon* muttered. "Now who in blazes could it be?"

He leaned forward in his saddle, straining his eyes to pierce the murk. Then, through the darkness, knifed a scream!

Tingling in every nerve, his scalp prickling, his palms wet with cold sweat, *El Halcon* jerked erect. The scream rose to a high crescendo of agony and terror, ending in a bubbling shriek. A moment later there was a sullen splash, then the sound of the boat coming nearer.

The Hawk started his black horse moving, following the slow curve of the bank in the direction of the thudding oarlocks. A mo-

[*Turn page*]

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ment later came an earthy thump, and a scuffling of booted feet.

"Landing," the Hawk breathed.

The cloud wrack thinned. Moonlight seeped through. Something dim and gigantic loomed directly in front of the slowly pacing horse. Slade saw a gleam of metal and hurled himself sideways in the saddle.

There was a reddish flash, a deafening roar. Buckshot screeched through the space Slade's body had occupied the instant before.

But Slade had jerked a little too far. He lost his balance and did a header out of the saddle, landing with a thump on the muddy ground. Instantly, he was on his feet, his hands streaking for his long, black guns.

But before he could clear leather, there was a crashing in the brush along the water's edge. The shotgun wielder was vanishing. Slade sent two wrathful bullets hissing after him, then, with a disgusted growl, ejected the spent shells from his guns and replaced them with fresh cartridges. Leaving Shadow, he made his way down the bank to the boat.

With an involuntary glance toward the shadowy growth into which the man had vanished, Slade struck a match and peered closer at the boat. He uttered a low exclamation as he identified the wet blotches on the floor boards.

"Blood, all right," he muttered. "Looks like some poor devil had good reason to yell. That splash must have been his body getting heaved overboard."

Something lying at the edge of the blood-stain attracted his notice. Gingerly he picked it up, turning it over in his slim, bronzed fingers.

It was a crudely fashioned image of a man, carved from some dark wood. The back of the figure was broken. Through its breast was thrust a long pin.

Walt Slade was not a man who scared easily, but he knew what the figure was, and he knew there were many who would be terrorized by finding such an object. The broken figure was voodoo work, and the pin stuck through the figure meant that a knife would soon be stuck through the heart of the man in whose image the figure was carved.

Still, voodoo was something that belonged in savage countries, in deep jungle lands—not in the West. Walt Slade was puzzled. What was the meaning of it here?

Of one thing, he was sure—it meant no good for himself. And of one thing YOU can be sure, when Walt Slade gets himself

marked for death, he'll be ready to fight back with blazing six-guns.

You'll find LAND OF TRADITION, by Bradford Scott, different from any other western you've ever read. It's packed with slam-bang action, fast horses, fighting men, and all the color and excitement of the Old West, of course. But in addition, it has deep, dark, eerie mystery that will keep the chills racing up your spine! Look forward to LAND OF TRADITION!

A second swell yarn in the next issue will be HOMBRE FROM BOOTHILL, a novelet by T. W. Ford.

Back out of the past, from the land of the dead, rode Stan Bannard like some uninvited ghost. Nobody in the Trigger Springs country was glad of his return. It was seven years since he had skulked out, disgraced, with blood on his hands.

Now, with his return, Stan Bannard seemed to strew the seeds of violence and double-dealing and bloodshed. Two men who'd been young when Stan had quitted the land with a posse on his coat-tails, now suddenly disappeared, deserting their families.

And, just as Stan returned, up in the Hondo Valley a horse rancher was found mysteriously dead with his brains blasted out. And quiet, peace-loving Sam Ponty, the old bartender, tried to go on the killing trail.

But most sinister of all, Boss Pitman of the big Circle P, cattle baron in the country, held a council of war and decreed that the Black Hoods must return to the Trigger Springs range. The Black Hoods had been terrorizing the cow country when Stan Bannard fled out of it.

That's the way HOMBRE FROM BOOTHILL starts. It's a yarn packed with amazing surprise twists, suspense and action. We think it a likely contender for honors as the best of the year!

Another slam-bang novelet in the next issue of THRILLING WESTERN tells of the battle a young rancher has to save his cousin from going bad and becoming an outlaw.

Clay Morgan and his cousin Bud were the last of their families' line, and they should have been close to each other, like their fathers had been before them. But Bud had a wild streak in him, and it had brought trouble. It was threatening more.

When Clay's influence over Bud snaps, all

[*Turn page*]

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LETTERS FROM READERS

AROUND the world, wherever men crave to read the best in western fiction you're likely to find a copy of THRILLING WESTERN. To show you just what we mean, listen to what the first contributor to our letter column this issue has to say:

I am a Frenchman aged 40 and I must confess that I do like Western stories. Some G.I.'s in Lyon gave me some, but it seems to me that those in your magazine are the best I ever read, and I enjoy them very well. But are cowboys still in existence? Do they still carry a gun? Do they wear the costume I see in the movies?—*Elie Bardet, Lyon, France.*

Thanks for your letter, Monsieur Bardet. Our answer is that cowboys very definitely are in existence. Great herds of cattle still range on our great Western plains, and the cowboys who tend them are frequently armed—both to safeguard themselves and the property they care for, as well as for protection against snakes, predatory animals, and other four-legged varmints. Yes, and cowboys wear the sort of clothes you see both in this magazine and in the movies.

On my weekly trip into Palo Alto I stopped at one of the stores and looked over the rows of magazines and found the latest issue of THRILLING WESTERN had arrived, so I picked one out and made a purchase. I have been reading this interesting magazine for some time and never miss Buck Benson's HITCHING RAIL. This last week I was with a group of veterans who journeyed to San Francisco to be guests of the Grand National Livestock Exposition at the Cow Palace. In the afternoon a rodeo was held and I saw some fine riding, dogging, and roping.

I would like to the West stay West. One of the old timers was on the program. He was with Cody in the early days, but he still rides and

appears active. I didn't hear his name so I can't send it along at this time. So long, and I hope to spend a few moments with you again.—*Randall L. Hoisington, Palo Alto, Calif.*

I have just finished the latest issue of THRILLING WESTERN and I think it is swell. Keep up the good work! RINGING STEEL, by Bradford Scott, was very good. Tell that man he sure knows how to write good stories. Also ALL ABOARD FOR GUNSMOKE, by Donald Bayne Hobart, was very good—*Jimmy De Lancy, Laredo, Texas.*

I was glad to see in the latest THRILLING WESTERN that you have the cowboy wearing a yellow shirt. Always the cowboys are wearing red shirts. You would think they never wore any color but red. And they certainly do. I know. I live in Kentucky now, but I was raised on the ranch and I consider myself a cowgirl from the wild and woolly West!—*Cynthia Sugden, Lexington, Ky.*

Let's have more stories with Walt Slade, the Hawk. He is the kind of shooting, riding man I like to read about. DEATH RIDES THE BORDER was his best story yet. I can hardly wait for the next one. Let's have a picture of his great black horse Shadow, on the cover. How about it?—*Orville J. Lickstitch, Jr., Brewster, N.Y.*

That's all the letters we'll quote from this time, pardners, but we promise to be back next issue with a batch that's bigger than ever. We hope YOUR letter or postcard will be among them. So please write us and tell us what you think of the stories you have read in THRILLING WESTERN. Your valued comments will help us make the magazine better than ever! Write today!

Please address your letter or postcard to The Editor, THRILLING WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N.Y. Thanks, pardners, and we'll be waiting to hear from you. So long till next issue!

—THE EDITOR.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON PAGE 90

1. Fort Benton.

2. One, by finding the key log holding the jam and releasing this log. Two, by using dynamite. Three, by pulling out a large section of logs on one side of the jam, and caving in the rest of the jam.

3. Ten to fifteen miles a day, because the steers had to graze as they went along.

4. So that punchers could identify their cattle when the steers were so close-packed that the flank brands could not be seen.

5. William H. Bonney.

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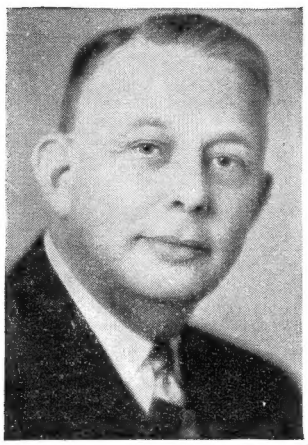

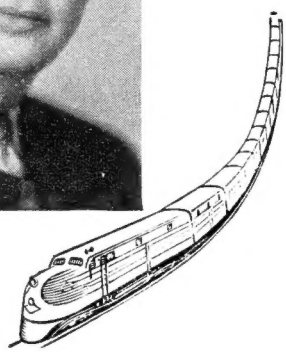

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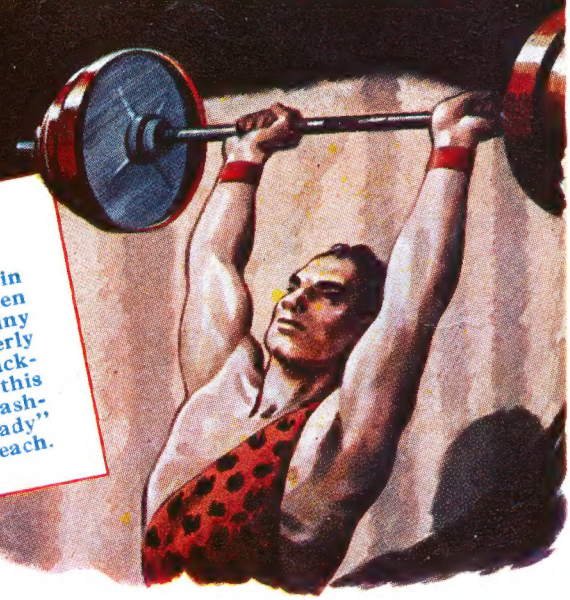

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